

HOUELLEBECQ, *PHILOSOPHE*: READING MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ AS
PHILOSOPHY, THEOLOGY, AND IDEOLOGY

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To my parents, Stafford and Lynette Betty, without whom none of this would have been possible.

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INTRODUCTION:
THE HOUELLEBECQUIAN WORLDVIEW

For anyone who was privy to Michel Houellebecq’s earliest work at the time of its publication, what followed over the next twenty years must seem like little more than variations on a very simple theme. Indeed, the very first sentence of *Rester vivant*—a sort of *art poétique* for future suicides—announced in no uncertain terms the moral gist of the entirety of the Houellebecquian oeuvre: “Le monde est une souffrance déployée” (Houellebecq, 1991b, p. 9). Suffering unfurled liked an enormous, sad sail over the planet: where Baudelaire had been content to describe the splenetic pall cast over modernity as a strikingly unpoetic “lid” (couvercle), Houellebecq, who lives on Ireland’s Atlantic coast, implies a more nautically-themed rendering of contemporary despair. In 2010, after five novels, a novella, three collections of poetry, a few tomes of assorted prose, and several legal battles, Houellebecq seems to have made his point well enough. Daniel25’s declaration at the end of *La possibilité d’une île* that “le fait d’exister est déjà un malheur” (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 471) is an epigrammatic précis of Houellebecq’s dismal portrayal of late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century Western civilization, which the author has spent the last twenty years writing for, and selling to, a public that has not yet grasped the extent of the destruction. As a consummate literary clown, Houellebecq draws laughs from his readers with a characteristic blend of black comedy, political incorrectness, and abusive generalization,¹ but the overall result, once the humor has faded and the book is set back on the bed stand, is more akin to a mixture of

¹ “Tout son discours en effet tend à allier aux accents vifs du désespoir singulier le burlesque toujours affleurant de la généralisation abusive” (Bessard-Banquy, 2007, p. 358).

depressive lucidity and sentimental lobotomy. One does not simply read Houellebecq—one recovers from him. However much laughter happens along the way, we do not finish the novel smiling.

The trademark lugubriousness of Houellebecq’s vision of the West finds expression in both his characters and his infamous *discours*—those unmistakably Houellebecquian rants about Islam, psychoanalysis, the decline of Christianity, and the suppleness of southeast-Asian prostitutes, which stay with their readers long after the plots and characters of the author’s novels have faded from memory. Houellebecq is in many respects a literary didactician: one has the impression that fashioning plots is a burden for him, now matter how brilliantly he manages to pull it off. Even his characters often serve as little more than mouthpieces for the expression of characteristically Houellebecquian thoughts.² One thinks of the extended discussions between Bruno and Michel in *Les particules élémentaires*, which Houellebecq uses to expound his own ideas about the prescience of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, or the travel scenes of *La Carte et le territoire*, where the reader discovers a trenchant narrative of the rise of the *discount airline* (Houellebecq, 2010a, p. 152). Houellebecq is both an ideologue and a novelist: different from a pure storyteller, he is not content with just any old yarn. Virtually all the events in his stories, from Bruno’s stomach-stuffing promenades along the Boulevard Saint-Germain, to Daniell’s uncanny excursions into the culture of Spain’s interstates, are wired for the expression of ideas, theses, social observation, and philosophical and ideological polemic. Houellebecq’s work defies the theoretical

² In a recent article in *Le Figaro*, Frédéric Beigbedder, a close friend of Houellebecq, writes, “Dans la vie, les artistes sont parfois différents de leur travail; pas lui. Le plus houellebécquien de ses personnages, c’est lui; raison pour laquelle ils s’appellent parfois Michel, et finalement Michel Houellebecq (dans le dernier)” (Beigbedder, 2010).

apparatus of the “death of the author” (or, to give some credit to structuralism’s New Critical precursors, the *fallacy of intention*), for his clarity of both prose and concept, his willingness to deal with issues of decisive social importance, and his habit of injecting his own opinions into his fiction have made him as much a philosopher, theologian, and social commentator as he is an artist. With Houellebecq, it is possible—and, more importantly, *necessary*—to move beyond issues of “textuality” and begin addressing literature as an arena not only of discourse but also of *discussion*.

And yet, on even the most peremptory reading of Houellebecq’s fiction, we encounter a world that is genuinely ugly, a universe of despair and suicide in which characters stagger through existence like animals injured by hunter’s bullet. Houellebecq’s fiction is not simply bleak, despairing, or tragic—it is honestly terrifying, and just as children will do at the sight of an ominous shadow in the far corner of the bedroom, we shut our eyes hoping that doing so will make the big, bad Houellebecq monster disappear. Just what to name this terror? Its name is *materialism*.³ It is a great oversight of Houellebecq scholarship past not to have honed in on this basic aspect of the author’s work. Houellebecq’s novels are, in the last analysis, not tales of the crimes of capitalism or of the derelict mother, nor are they apologies for sex tourism, eugenics, or cloning; rather, they are stories that, much like the most theological works of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Camus, treat the social and psychological consequences of a worldview in which religion, God, immortality, and all thought of the sacred have

³ I am not speaking here of Marxist historical materialism, but rather of the scientific conception of materialism, according to which all that exists in the universe—from simple gases all the way up to human minds—is the result of uniquely physical processes. Such a notion, which may also be referred to as *physicalism* (in order to avoid confusion with the Marxist concept, though the two are related in broad respects), rules out the existence of supernatural phenomena such as soul and spirit, reducing them to physical processes within the brain.

disappeared.⁴ Houellebecq's characters are case studies in the moral disintegration of the godless, of those who have accepted a *scientistic* view of the world, according to which all life on earth is the product of a random mixing of chemicals, life ends in the annihilation of being, and no higher power exists to ground the moral order. The opening lines of *H.P. Lovecraft, contre le monde, contre la vie*, Houellebecq's first book, provide as concise a statement as any in the Houellebecquian corpus of this point of view:

Peu d'êtres auront été à ce point imprégnés, transpercés jusqu'aux os par le néant absolu de toute aspiration humaine. L'univers n'est qu'un furtif arrangement de particules élémentaires. Une figure de transition vers le chaos. Qui finira par l'emporter. La race humaine disparaîtra. D'autres races apparaîtront, disparaîtront à leur tour. Les cieux seront glaciaux et vides, traversés par la faible lumière d'étoiles à demi-mortes. Qui, elles aussi, disparaîtront. Tout disparaîtra. Et les actions humaines sont aussi libres et dénuées de sens que les libres mouvements des particules élémentaires. Le bien, le mal, la morale, les sentiments? Pures "fictions victoriennes." Seul l'égoïsme existe. Froid, inentamé, rayonnant (Houellebecq, 1991, 13).

Houellebecq leaves little doubt about the sources of his creative inspiration: "Peut-être est-ce que, comme Lovecraft, je n'ai jamais fait qu'écrire des *contes matérialistes d'épouvante...*" (Houellebecq, 2009, p. 294). The *mal occidental* for the author is exactly what it was for his nineteenth-century intellectual forebear, Auguste Comte: that "le manque d'une croyance qui permette à l'homme de se transcender mine le lien social et l'empêche de faire face à son destin mortel" (Chabert, 2002, p. 193).⁵ In a world where the disappearance of religion has left men and women with little means of

⁴ I have in mind Tolstoy's *A Confession*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Camus' *The Plague*.

⁵ Though Houellebecq is beholden to Comte and to Schopenhauer for his positivist tendencies and his pessimism, respectively, his *dépressionisme* is more clearly linked to Lovecraft, whom the author presents as a person for whom "il n'y a aucune place concevable" (Houellebecq, 1991a, p. 104) within capitalist culture. Houellebecq's own discouragement with liberal society—an incapacity which is perhaps most evident in his poetry (see, for instance, the poems "Chomage" and "Dernier rempart contre le libéralisme" in *Poésies* (Houellebecq, 2000b, pp. 12, 52)—is a prominent component of his public persona, and it is no surprise that the author considers *H.P. Lovecraft: Contre le monde, contre la vie*, as a first novel rather than a simple biography.

addressing their deep existential worries, all that remains to stave off the fear of death is the feverish pursuit of physical and sexual gratification. Houellebecq's characters can be divided into those engaged in that pursuit—Tisserand, Bruno, Michel and Valérie, Daniell, Esther; and those whose failure, unwillingness, or inability to do so leads to depression and suicide—the narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, Djerzinski, Annabelle, Christiane, again Michel from *Plateforme* (at the end), Isabelle, and Daniell once Esther has abandoned him. In the end, neither approach solves anything: these characters either commit suicide, are institutionalized, or live out the rest of their lives in the bitter anticipation of their own extinction. Houellebecq challenges his readers to evaluate their own psychological wellbeing in view of the worldview he presents. The author declares: here is a world in which the consequences of materialism are followed through to their logical conclusions: despair, insanity, death, and suicide. Is this the world you live in? Houellebecq asks his reader. And if so, how do you expect to avoid the fates of Tisserand, Bruno, Annabelle, and Daniell? Given the blunt ferocity of such questions, it is little wonder that many readers experience a sense of unease upon reading Houellebecq's work.

The other side of the Houellebecquian worldview is, of course, the condemnation of liberalism, consumerism, and the cultural consequences of Americanization. The pathos of many of the author's major characters is grounded in some alienation or injury suffered under the liberal regime. While the narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* despairs at the commodification of eroticism and the phenomena of sexual pauperization it produces, in *Plateforme* Michel's attempts to sell Asian sex to Westerners results in the death of his lover, Valérie, and his own psychological disintegration. Houellebecq's

critique of liberalism is inseparable from his critique of contemporary sexuality. The individualism, narcissism, and self-centeredness that have followed Americanization and the *libéralisation des mœurs* in other Western countries have given rise to a generation of Westerners who are too focused on themselves to be concerned with the physical pleasure of others. Thus many of the men and women in Houellebecq's fiction turn to sadomasochism or the humiliations of group sex, or, as in *Plateforme*, they abandon Europe in order to seek physical gratification among the prostitutes of Southeast Asia. If liberalism has ruined anything, it has ruined sex, and with it intimacy, compassion, and the possibility of real love.

However pivotal Houellebecq's treatment of liberalism may be in the reception of his work, it is nonetheless important to point out that the causal priority moves from materialism to capitalism, not the other way around. In Houellebecq's view, the collapse of the theological conception of the human being—the principal consequence of the emergence of the modern, scientific worldview—has given rise to a social order in which human value is restricted to the parameters of simple economic exchange. One's attractiveness, even lovability, is determined by indisputable criteria of market value, as if the human being were no different, in principle, from an automobile or toaster oven. This economic rendering of human identity is fed by the physicalism of modern science, which dismisses the possibility of free will and reduces the human being to a haphazard, fleeting collection of elementary particles. Humanism, which attempts to assign man rights in the absence of a Deity capable of legitimating the moral order, does not stand a chance in these conditions. Aside from liberal capitalism, all humanistic attempts to organize society according to non-theological principles (Marxism, socialism,

communism, etc.) have been failures, and if capitalism has succeeded, this is only because it is the most natural form of social organization, and thus the worst. The unbinding of man from God lies at the heart of the historical narrative we encounter in Houellebecq's work: lacking a set of moral principles legitimated by a higher power, and unable to find meaningful answers to basic existential questions, human beings descend into selfishness and narcissism and can only stymie their mortal terror by recourse to the carnal distractions of sexuality. Capitalism is the mode of social organization best suited to such a worldview. Materialism—that is, the limiting of all that is real to the physical, which rules out the existence of God, soul, spirit, and with them ultimate meaning—thus produces an environment in which a materialism of consumption becomes the norm. Such is the historical narrative that grounds Houellebecq's fiction, with capitalism as the final, devastating consequence of humanity's despiritualization.

“Materialist horror” is the term that offers the best description of the Houellebecquian worldview, for what we encounter throughout Houellebecq's fiction are societies and persons in which the terminal social and psychological consequences of materialism are being played out. No surprise, then, that these texts are so unrelentingly apocalyptic. In *Les particules élémentaires* and *La possibilité d'une île*, we witness the outright disappearance of a depressive and morally derelict human race; in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, *Lanzarote*, and *Plateforme*, we see the destruction of persons—the narrator, Rudi, and Michel—who are simply unable to endure the depravity of the liberal system. In *La carte et le territoire*, finally, it is France that becomes exhausted with industrial society, opting for *muséification* as a means of cultural extinction. As the late French social critic Philippe Muray wrote in his review of *Les particules élémentaires*, in

Houellebecq we find an author who “glimpses the end in everything.”⁶ Houellebecq has so thoroughly dismantled Western civilization in his novels that one wonders how he manages to go on living in it.

This dissertation is an attempt to present American and other English-speaking readers with the religious, theological, and philosophical aspects of Houellebecq’s work. To write on Houellebecq as an American—and as an American in the United States—allows me to consider a whole host of issues concerning religion that would be difficult, if not impossible, to entertain in France or in other secular European states. France, in particular, is a country in which departments of Religious Studies are unheard of; it is possible to study religion as a component of history or sociology, but any interest in theological questions is referred either to private *facultés de théologie* or simply to the parish priest. The French government, dedicated to Republican laical ideology, keeps no record of French citizens’ and residents’ religious affiliation, and it is common practice (as anyone who follows current affairs will know) to ban religious representations in public spaces. Due to its peculiar historical relationship with religion, France is a country in which religious *appartenance* is not considered a relevant aspect of national belonging or public identity. Needless to say, this official attitude toward religion will not do in the case of Michel Houellebecq. The author’s treatment and critique of modernity are inseparable from the question of “religious decline” in France. However curious it may be to say so, it is perhaps only in a country such as the United States, where religious discourse and identity constitute a manifest component of social existence, that a proper

⁶ “Et, en tout, apercevoir la fin” (1999b) is the title of Muray’s review of *Les particules élémentaires*. The title is a reference to page 297 of the novel, where Houellebecq, describing Michel and Annabelle’s belated love affair, writes, “Certains jours pourtant, pris dans la grâce d’une magie imprévue, ils traversaient des moments d’air frais, de grand soleil tonique; mais le plus souvent ils sentaient qu’une ombre grise s’étendait en eux, sur la terre qui les portait, et en tout ils apercevaient la fin.”

reception of Houellebecq's work is possible. At the risk of indulging in a conceit, I should point out that it was not an American, but the Frenchman Tocqueville, who produced the study *par excellence* of American democracy; on the same token, in questions of religion, France is evidently in need of an *outside opinion*. The discussion of Houellebecq's work from an American perspective not only permits an accurate and honest rendering of the religious question in the author's fiction, but continues a tradition of transatlantic dialogue that has been critical to each nation's self-understanding, as that has, on numerous occasions, saved us from the worst of ourselves.

Michel Houellebecq is a provocative figure, and his ability to offend readers is unique among major contemporary writers. In few other authors working today do we find such an eagerness to defy the benchmarks of political correctness. Houellebecq deals with issues of immediate social and cultural significance—Islam, sexual liberalism, technology and post-humanism, immigration and the *banlieue*, to name but a few—but in his treatment of those issues he manifests an almost bullying lack of concern for the political sensitivities of his audience. Feminist readers of Houellebecq, or even those of us who do no more than toe a moderately feminist line, can only grind their teeth in indignation when Daniell says of Esther that “comme toutes les très jolies jeunes filles elle n'était au fond bonne qu'à baiser” (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 215), or as Robert in *Plateforme* praises the “elasticity” of certain components of Thai women's anatomy (Houellebecq, 2001a, p. 112). The atmosphere of sanctimony and recrimination that has surrounded and continues to surround the publication of Houellebecq's novels is remarkable (especially now that the author has won the Goncourt, France's most prestigious literary prize, for *La carte et le territoire*), and even the most engaged critics

have been careful to issue the requisite condemnation of the author's seemingly egregious neglect of political decency.⁷ Houellebecq is an author that the political morality of the day exhorts us to condemn, no matter how much we might enjoy his work—and no matter how much he might, at times, have a point.

Enough has been said in denigration of Houellebecq that I feel no need to issue any further rebuke. While at least one critic has been all too eager to suggest, for example, that Houellebecq's presentation of misogynistic diatribe in *Extension du domaine de lutte* "will not serve as a safe frame for the narrator's misogyny" (Crowley, 2002, p. 25) (in other words, that Houellebecq's own apparent misogyny is written into the text), I must admit to having no interest whatsoever in participating in this sort of *moral administration* of the author's work, no more than I would that of the work of Antonin Artaud, Jean Genêt, or the Marquis de Sade. Put bluntly, I fail to understand the purpose of such criticism. Houellebecq writes and says things that offend many people—this is undeniable. But for a critic to declare that which is *offending* to be *offensive* is an act of moral legislating that, at least in my mind, has no place in scholarly writing.

⁷ Murielle Lucie Clément, who has written two books on Houellebecq and co-edited a third, writes, "Je pense... que les héros houellebecquiens ont des tendances racistes, misogynes et xénophobes. Mais, je pense aussi qu'ils sont un signal d'alarme et nous tendent un miroir où songer notre image pour déceler si au fond de nous ne s'embusque pas une parcelle, aussi infinitésimale soit-elle, de celles de leur particularités qui nous déplaisent tant. Toutefois... je m'interroge sur la parution d'un ouvrage qui charrie la haine de l'Autre, la misogynie, la xénophobie et le racisme dans une diégèse qui peut facilement être interprétée au premier degré et se révèle alors dangereuse dans son idéologie sous-jacent" (Clément, 2006, p. 99). Clément is being too cautious here: certainly many readers of Houellebecq have had the thoughts—though without necessarily *assenting* to them—that many of the author's characters present in their "racist" and "misogynistic" *discours*. Indeed, much of Houellebecq's popularity lies in his ability to say bluntly what others think but are afraid to utter. The author admits as much in a recent interview: "You laugh because the insult claims merely to state the obvious. This may be unusual in literature but it isn't in private life. 'Well, you have to admit, Islam is moronic' is something you could easily say in private. This sort of slightly apologetic statement seems to me a part of French culture. For example, a girl was telling me about a friend who was pretty ugly and was fighting for abortion rights. She was describing their conversation and she said, 'I don't mean to be mean, but nobody would want to get her pregnant anyway.' In conversations the French use that kind of apologetic insult all the time. There's a common-sense side to it, which I quite like" (Houellebecq, 2010b). In any case, it is possible to have xenophobic and sexist thoughts without agreeing with them; one must be careful not to confuse conviction with a sordid imagination.

Whether products of conviction or sordid imagination, the *discours* Houellebecq presents in his writing, be they racist, sexist, or simply upsetting to certain sensibilities, are part of broader public discourse and for that reason are worthy of our interest and attention. Accordingly, in this dissertation I have avoided discussion of political incorrectness where possible—admitting, of course, that it is impossible to sidestep such a discussion altogether. Conversation about the offending nature of areas of Houellebecq’s work is better left to the press and to non-academic readers; scholars do well to concentrate on the literary and intellectual elements of Houellebecq’s work and leave the muckraking to the public. If we cannot read Houellebecq charitably, we can at least try to read him objectively; this is all that scholarly enterprise demands.

Plan of This Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into six chapters, each of which (excluding the first) addresses a specific set of issues related to Houellebecq’s treatment of religion, philosophy, *laïcité*, and the French intellectual and literary traditions. Houellebecq borrows widely from various intellectual and academic domains, including quantum physics, analytic philosophy, and utopian socialism, and it has been necessary throughout the course of this undertaking to provide overview and explanation of the myriad theories and ideas that inform the author’s creative work. Readers of this text will discover concise presentation and discussion of such subjects as the mind-body problem, positivism, quantum physics, and sociological theories of religion and secularization, as well as mention of such diverse figures in the history of ideas as Charles Fourier, Maximilien Robespierre, Edmond Burke, Raymond Aron, and the Victorian

parapsychologist F.W.H. Myers. Ultimately, this dissertation serves not only to provide careful exegesis of Houellebecq's texts, but also situates the author's engagement with religion, theology, and philosophy within the broader context of the history of ideas, both French and Anglo-American. The following chapter summaries, which exclude my preliminary chapter, since it is a literature review, will give a clearer indication of the direction my comments will take:

Preliminary Chapter: literature review of press and scholarly work on Houellebecq.

Chapter two addresses Houellebecq's representation and treatment of materialism, positivism, quantum physics, and posthuman utopia in both his fiction and non-fiction works. For a novelist, Houellebecq's knowledge of modern physics is impressive, and his penchant for amateur philosophizing is perhaps unusual among most contemporary French fiction writers (with the notable exception of Maurice Dantec, who tends to philosophize *ad nauseum*). However, faced with philosophical and scientific rigor, many of the author's claims about quantum physics, logical positivism, and mind-brain materialism fail to add up. Houellebecq contends in *Ennemis publics*, for instance, that he is not a materialist, despite his thoroughgoing atheism and commitment to a naturalistic view of human personality. Citing Auguste Comte, he argues that the empirical dilemmas confronting scientific efforts to demonstrate the reducibility of mind to brain prove mind-brain materialism to be misguided—a confusing position to say the least for a man who describes himself as “a curmudgeonly pain in the ass because I refuse to diverge from the scientific method or to believe there is a truth beyond science” (Houellebecq, 2010b). Additionally, in *Les particules élémentaires*, Houellebecq

suggests that quantum physics may have some application to biological systems, and that human nature might be improved by prevailing upon quantum theory in the elaboration of a new human genetic code. I investigate the philosophical and scientific moorings of these claims and conclude that Houellebecq, though a gifted appropriator of science and philosophy for the purposes of fiction, both fails to understand the concept of materialism and is mistaken about quantum physics' application to biological systems. These subjects are of great thematic, aesthetic, and metaphorical importance in the author's work, but the reasoning and imagination that Houellebecq brings to bear on them leaves much to be desired in the way of rigor.

In **chapter three**, I present and critique Houellebecq's portrayal of religious decline in contemporary European civilization. As I discussed above, the author's novels depict a postmodern and post-Christian Europe in which nihilism, hedonism, and a sense of life's meaninglessness dominate the majority worldview. His major characters—typically white, nominally or traditionally Catholic French men and women—are inveterate atheists who balk at any notion of the transcendent or otherworldly, and who, as a consequence, are frequently given over to moments of existential anguish and see little purpose in life other than the pursuit of physical pleasure. Houellebecq's image of Europe as characterized by atheism and impiety is, however, far from realistic, for statistics on European religiosity consistently show that the majority of Europeans, and even French, either believe in God or in some kind of supernatural power or force (in spite of broad declines in Church attendance and participation in religious ritual in the last five decades). I discuss current data on contemporary religious trends in Europe, as well as recent scholarship in sociology of religion, and argue that Houellebecq's

description of a post-religious Europe is in fact a fictional rendering of *classical secularization theory*, which erroneously contends that modernity and science are incompatible with religion and religious belief. Rather than addressing issues of European religiosity in factual terms, Houellebecq's work instead explores the perceived psychological consequences of atheism among the minority of Europeans, Houellebecq included, who have adopted a scientific and naturalistic view of the world. The disintegration of French Catholic Christianity as a *structuring institution* has, of course, produced qualitative changes in the fervor and certainty of belief; but the author's depiction of a de-Christianized Europe that is beholden only to atheism is a consequence of his own disbelief, and moreover fails to take into account the flourishing of Islam in France's suburbs (*les banlieues*).

Chapter four explores Houellebecq's treatment of New Religious Movements and the prospects for religious innovation in officially secular states such as France. In *La possibilité d'une île*, Houellebecq imagines a future European society in which a cloning cult known as Elohimism (based on the Raelian sect that was founded in France in 1974 by prophet Claude Vorilhon) has supplanted Christianity and Islam to become the Old World's leading religion. The sect promises its adherents immortality through cloning and machine-mind transfer and preaches a cult of youth that limits the meaning of existence to gratification of sexual and other physical desires. I discuss the beliefs and practices of the Elohimite Church and investigate Elohimism's claims to religionhood based on both classical Durkheimian definitions of religion and more recent understandings that locate the essence of religion in the supernatural. Incorporating the work of contemporary French philosopher Marcel Gauchet, I also address the origins and

consequences of the laical bias in modern French political thought and contend, as does Gauchet, that the political doctrine of *laïcité* no longer provides a solid base for French identity. In depicting the birth and rise of Elohimism in *La possibilité d'une île*, Houellebecq enters into a debate about the future of religious expression in an officially secular society and, more subtly, elaborates an alternative to an Islam that he finds abhorrent. Even so, I conclude chapter four by arguing that despite the perceived deficiencies of Islam, Elohimism represents a solution to Western spiritual malaise that is even more horrific than Islam (and other religions, to be sure) at its worst. Ultimately, this chapter of the dissertation encourages readers and scholars to understand Houellebecq's fiction as a serious commentary on contemporary European religiosity, and also engages in debates about the nature and definition of religion that preoccupy current work in sociology of religion.

In **chapter five**, I place Houellebecq's thought within the context of nineteenth-century pre-Marxist French utopian socialism. The utopian scenarios that the author portrays in novels such as *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La possibilité d'une île* borrow heavily from religious and quasi-religious nineteenth-century French utopian thought, specifically that of Auguste Comte. The fifth chapter of this dissertation examines and reviews the work of such utopians as Charles Fourier, Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon, and Auguste Comte, as well as the revolutionary and religious discourse of Maximilien Robespierre, and compares these thinkers' work with Houellebecq's depiction of posthuman utopia in certain of his novels. Although "Houellebecquian utopia" is in many respects an experimental *mise en scène* of Comtian positivism, the author faults Comte for failing to make provision for personal immortality in his Religion of Man.

Accordingly, Houellebecq elaborates a religious response to a dissolute and godless modernity in which immortality is achieved through cloning. However, by the end of *La possibilité d'une île*, the author appears to abandon his utopian predilections and portrays posthuman “clone” society as even more meaningless and unhappy than twenty-first-century Western civilization. Chapter five also suggests that Houellebecq, were he ever to envision writing a novel less consistently pessimistic about humanity’s spiritual condition, might take great interest in a lesser-known but equally significant religious movement that emerged in the nineteenth century—Spiritism, as well as the work and research done in parapsychology and psychical phenomena by Victorian scientists such as F.W.H. Myers, Henry Sidgwick, and Edward Gurney. In the end, those who are sensitive to the existential impasses that Houellebecq presents should find motivation in the author’s work to elaborate more meaningful and effective solutions to the perceived dilemmas of Western modernity.

Finally, in the **concluding chapter** of this dissertation, I move away from assessing the realism of Houellebecq’s description of Western modernity and return to the worldview that gives rise to the author’s peculiarly grim vision. I also discuss Houellebecq’s position within contemporary French intellectual and literary production and consider his work in relation to varying reactions to May 1968, as well as to Americanization, in the last four decades. The conclusion also considers the significance of Houellebecq’s newest novel, *La carte et le territoire*, in relation to the author’s previous efforts. Those who have read the novel will notice that the engagement with utopianism that characterized previous texts is mostly absent; in this respect,

Houellebecq's most recent work represents a turning point in the author's outlook that I will address in the final section of the conclusion.

Note on Method

As the title of this dissertation indicates, I will not be offering much in the way of “literary analysis” in this text (whatever that term may actually mean), but will rather be addressing Houellebecq's work much as if it were a philosophical, theological, or ideological treatise. This has been a conscious decision, and I believe it is fully warranted. Houellebecq's fiction is certainly of great literary merit; the sense of tragedy that his characters' sad lives so often impart, the biting irony of the author's prose, and the distant, almost sociological tone of a novel such as *Les particules élémentaires*, all stir the aesthetic sense of the reader and leave little doubt about the identity of the author. Yet, on the same token, Houellebecq's work is too clearly the product of a “thinker” to forego subjection to the kind of analysis I am proposing here. French literature has recently emerged, or may only be emerging, from an era in which the art of the novel had become almost exclusively that—an art—whereas in the era of Camus and Sartre much more emphasis was placed on the expression of philosophical debate in the fictional context. This is not to say that these writers were didactic or preachy in their fiction; rather, I mean only to call attention to the fact that any insistence that literature be read from a formalistic or textual point of view conceals its own historicity, and that no reason exists in principle not to treat a literary text at least in part as a philosophical document. Like Camus, Houellebecq uses fiction as a medium for the expression of serious theological and philosophical ideas, and it is those ideas, not the form in which they are

presented, that are of primary interest to me here. Thus the reader will find me making claims such as “Houellebecq gets it wrong” on such and such an issue, or that he is “mistaken” about certain empirical realities concerning European religion, for example; in any event, I do not want to treat as unimportant the artistic components of Houellebecq’s fiction, for certainly these are just as significant in reading the author’s work as are my concerns here. I simply warn the reader that, when I employ such language, I am not failing in my duties as a literary critic but rather am following an approach in which those duties are, at least in some respects, suspended. Houellebecq has a terrible habit of saying in person what he says in fiction; this observation is perhaps the major justification for the tack I am taking here, and, as will become apparent further on, it allows me to move in directions where other scholars might be more hesitant, or simply less willing, to follow.

PRELIMINARY CHAPTER:

HOUELLEBECQ WEIGHED: AN OVERVIEW OF PRESS AND CRITICAL RECEPTION

Putting together a literature review of critical and press reception of Houellebecq's writing is something akin to synthesizing the complete works of Alexandre Dumas. The provocative nature of so much of Houellebecq's oeuvre has generated a flow of press light years in length, while scholars from all walks of the Academy have amassed, in only little over a decade, a sizeable canon of critical material, dedicated in part to weighing Houellebecq's worth against his French literary forebears, in part to analyzing the philosophical, stylistic, and polemical nature of the author's recent and past efforts. In this initial chapter, I propose to synthesize this material—though certainly not all of it—as best I can, into something resembling a literature review, with the very simple intention of giving the reader a sense of *what has been said so far* about Michel Houellebecq. Naturally, the items to be covered extend far beyond the bounds of the Hexagon: though the scandal surrounding much of Houellebecq's work—specifically, the *affaire Houellebecq* that arose in the wake of *Les particules élémentaires*, as well as the legal controversy surrounding Houellebecq's comments on Islam in 2001—was centered in Paris, English-speaking and North American media have faithfully followed the author's embattled sojourn across the French literary landscape, with trenchant coverage in such significant dailies as the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and the Guardian. In the world of scholarship, engagement with Houellebecq's work has turned up in such places as the University of Amsterdam, where Sabine van Wesemael has put together a monograph and two volumes of essays treating

all things Houellebecq; in Yale French Studies; and in myriad French- and English-language academic journals with international readership. In short, much has already been said about Houellebecq in both the press and the Academy, and it will be important here to give an account of it. I will begin by reviewing press reception, both French and Anglophone, and then move on to scholarship.

Houellebecq in The Press

Perhaps the strangest thing about the appearance of *Les particules élémentaires* in the fall of 1998 was that, while so many critics were dismissive of or even hostile toward the novel, all agreed that Houellebecq's second work of fiction was the undisputed event of the literary season. On August 29th, 1998, *Le Temps* ran a piece entitled "Une nouvelle vague d'écrivains, Michel Houellebecq en tête, veut sonner le glas de la fiction traditionnelle," which nonetheless offered the reproach that "les thèses défendues sont étrangement pauvres et confuses," and that "Michel Houellebecq a du roman une conception très ambitieuse qu'il affronte avec talent mais qui sombre dans la mélasse du discours théorique" (Rüf, 1998). On the same day, *Le Point*, presenting *Particules* as "un des événements de la rentrée," declared it "pas indemne d'une fibre réactionnaire" and that "le roman paraît pourtant acquiescer à ce qu'il critique: le regard attristé, la mauvaise conscience, la vision neuroleptique du monde" (*Le Point*, 1998). On September 7th, *La Croix*, admitting that Houellebecq's novel was none other than the "événement de cette rentrée," at the same time qualified *Particules* as redolent of "une odeur franchement nauséuse, une authentique vulgarité," and that in any case it was a "roman fabriqué"

whose author had “opté pour une écriture à ce point sans effet que, d’écriture, on ne peut justement guère parler” (Crom, 1998).

This sort of panning was typical of the days and weeks that followed. For example, the September 8th edition of *Les Echos* declared *Les particules élémentaires* “un rien didactique, truffé de parenthèses scientifiques... le livre, à vrai dire, paraît surtout... fabriqué” (Coppermann, 1998) *Le Figaro* on September 10th described the novel as a “griffonnage cahoté” and an “interminable porno-misère” (Ollivier, 1998). Making matters worse for Houellebecq at the time of publication was that “L’espace du possible,” the New Age resort he had so ridiculed in the novel, was suing the author for defamation after Houellebecq had used to the resort’s real name and given away its location in the text. “L’espace” was seeking to have the 18,000 remaining copies of the *Les particules élémentaires* in which its name was used destroyed. Thus, in the space of only a few days, a virtually unknown computer technician at the French Parliament, with only one novel and a few tomes of poetry under his belt, had become the *persona non grata* of the Parisian literary milieu. Houellebecq was embattled from all sides, and his book had become a focal point for broader discussions in France about political correctness and the social role of literature.

The reasons Houellebecq’s novel met with such rhetorical vehemence in the hands of the press are already well attested. The work had wrought its greatest offense by criticizing the progressive heritage of the ’68 generation. Reporting to the *New York Times* about the Houellebecq affair in early March of 1999, Alan Riding wrote, “...Some older writers of the ’68 generation and intellectuals who still see the world through the left-right prism also criticized the work. For them, anyone opposed to abortion, sexual

freedom, environmentalism and European integration has to be reactionary” (Riding, 1999). Perhaps even more to the point, Emily Eakin in the *Times Literary Supplement* of September 10th, 2000, said of the scandal surrounding *Les particules élémentaires*:

The wretched characters, affectless prose and clinical descriptions of group sex (“Bruno and Rudi took turns penetrating Hannelore”) are deeply disturbing. But the French took exception to something else: the book’s militant ideology. “The Elementary Particles” takes pains to ensure that we don’t see Bruno and Michel as products of bad parenting or dumb luck. Rather, they are victims awash in post-1960’s values. Over the course of the novel’s 272 pages, Houellebecq catalogues a daunting number of alleged sources—the free market, New Age mysticism, legal abortion, skyrocketing divorce rates, materialism, debauchery—and lays them at the door of counterculture idealism (Eakin, 2000).

Houellebecq had dared to condemn the sacrosanct legacy of the 1960’s, and had done so by recourse to a style and method of character development that seemed more informed by sociology than by literature.⁸ In a literary culture accustomed to psychologism, a florid and distinct *litterarité*, and a kind of vulgarized Proustian aesthetic sensibility that pined over the “petits plaisirs de la vie,”⁹ Houellebecq’s sweeping ideological statements about the fate of Western culture, nuanced by a clinical treatment of human emotion, had shaken current conceptions about the social meaning of the novel, the author having

⁸ Anthony Quinn writes, “Houellebecq doesn’t dramatize his material; he compiles it. In the first section [of *The Elementary Particles*], he keeps a watchful eye on dates yet barely attempts dialogue, an absence that lends the book an air of a slightly musty social history (Quinn, 2000).

⁹ This is similar to the criticism that Olivier Bardolle and François Ricard level against the contemporary French, and specifically Parisian, literary milieu. Bardolle writes, “...le procès du parisianisme autosatisfait ne date pas d’aujourd’hui, mais la littérature vaine qui en découle continue encore de nos jours, sous la pression du marketing, à déverser des tombereaux de textes insignifiants chez des libraires exténués par tant d’insuffisance. Simplement, et c’est là le problème, cette littérature française moderne est non seulement exsangue, mais aussi terriblement emmerdante, c’est-à-dire inexportable” (Bardolle, 2004, pp. 12-13). And Ricard, “[Le succès de Houellebecq] ne cadre guère avec ceux auxquels nous sont habitués l’édition et les médias depuis une dizaine d’années, et qui relèvent presque tous de la même tendance, du même paradigme: celui de la ‘littérature niaiseuse...’ Par là, il faut entendre un certain type de livres, parfois présentés pompeusement comme des ‘romans,’ et dont le propos essentiel et de (re)donner aux lecteur/trices le sentiment d’être ‘bien dans leur peau,’ c’est-à-dire de les consoler dans leur désenchantement, de les réconcilier avec eux-mêmes et de leur faire aimer la beauté du monde, grand et petit, dans lequel nous avons malgré tout le bonheur de vivre” (Ricard, 1999, p. 49).

exploited the medium to polemicize at length on political subjects of no small amount of controversy among the French.

This, in essence, was the initial *affaire Houellebecq*. Houellebecq came off as reactionary, depressive, was politically incorrect, and moreover cast a public persona of immense oddity.¹⁰ His novel appeared to make an apology for eugenics; it painted Western and specifically French civilization as in its death throes; it insisted on the importance of religion as a binding social force; and, worst of all, it presented a France in which sexual liberation and Americanization had made life simply impossible. Houellebecq had his finger on France in ways unmatched by any other writer, and he had no compunction about poking her most open and most embarrassing wounds. However much anyone might have appreciated (and however secretly) certain elements of his work, it thus seemed necessary in virtually every review (of which I have provided a representative sample above) to issue a kind of caveat to the reader, if not an expression of disgust. The most significant condemnation of the novel's ideological overtones came in fact from a literary circle of which Houellebecq had formerly been a member, a group called Perpendiculaire whose review was published by the very same publishing house, Flammarion, that had brought out *Les particules élémentaires*. The members of the circle, including Nicolas Bourriaud, Christophe Duchatelet, Jean-Yves Jouannais, Christophe Kihm, Jacques-François Marchandise, and Laurent Quintreau, had forced the author from their ranks for ideological disagreements not long before the publication of *Les particules élémentaires*, and in the wake of the novel's appearance attempted to

¹⁰ For instance, Pierre-Yves Le Priol recounts in *La-Croix* Houellebecq's utterly bizarre behavior during a television appearance just after the publication of *Les particules élémentaires*. He writes, "Car, qu'il écrive bien ou mal, Michel Houellebecq ne sait pas parler, surtout devant les caméras. Renoncer aux onomatopées et aux monosyllabes—'pfff, mouais, ben, euh'—pour prononcer toute une phrase relevait pour lui du défi impossible" (Le Priol, 1998).

distance themselves even further. In a widely read piece published in *Le Monde* on October 10th, 1998, the group attacked Houellebecq for the ideological nature of his work, writing,

Le roman de Michel Houellebecq peut ainsi se réclamer de la théorie des quanta pour composer une ode au déterminisme biologique, ou prétendre lutter contre le néo-libéralisme en défendant mordicus l'idée qu'il faut calibrer l'humanité par la génétique pour aboutir à un produit parfait. Tout cela est normal et il faudrait vraiment être à la solde de la pensée unique pour y trouver à redire (Bourriaud, et al., 1998).

The implicit charges of being “reactionary” or “fascist” were nothing new. Indeed, Houellebecq had already, in an open letter to *Le Monde* on September 18th responding to a previous attack (published September 10th) from *Perpendiculaire*, written, “j’ai écrit un livre réactionnaire; toute réflexion est devenue réactionnaire” and added, “Je n’ai pas (pas encore?) reçu de menaces de mort ; reste qu’à travers mon livre quelque chose (une génération? un siècle? un système économique? une civilisation?) s’est senti jugé” (Houellebecq, 1998c). Despite Houellebecq’s plea to be read fairly, Marion van Renterghem followed *Perpendiculaire*’s lead on November 9th, noting, in reference to the ideological contents of Houellebecq’s novel, “Tout un programme dont on ne serait pas sûr que l’auteur n’y adhère pas. Neutralité du style, réduction des personnages à l’état de particules, confusion progressive des deux héros demi-frères et du narrateur clone contribuent à susciter les soupçons sur l’origine, dans le roman, des discours” (Renterghem, 1998). From being morose, depressive, overly technical, etc., Houellebecq had now evolved into an ideological liability for French letters. Little matter that his sales were in the hundreds of thousands; his was only a “succès de scandale,” and in the meantime it was vital that the lettered segments of the French population issue the requisite condemnations.

(It is worth noting that Houellebecq did experience some relief in the midst of all this chastisement. “L’espace du possible” was never successful in its suit against the author, though Houellebecq and Flammarion did agree to change the name of the camp and the details of its location in later print runs and to pay L’espace 5,000 francs. Meanwhile, Flammarion announced in October of 1998 that it had ceased all collaboration with Perpendiculaire.)

It would be possible to go on for quite some time documenting the disapproval with which Houellebecq and *Les particules élémentaires* met in the French press; I will spare the reader the boredom. Suffice it to say that Houellebecq had perfected the “art de déplaire” (Guiou, 1999) and in doing so his novel, as one reviewer put it in December 1998, had “fait l’effet d’une bombe” (*Sud Ouest*, 1998). Houellebecq did, however, receive support from certain significant figures on the French literary scene, with likely the most important defense coming from Dominique Noguez, who accused Houellebecq’s detractors of “la rage de ne pas lire”—that is, of having isolated the ideological elements of the text from its narrative structure and treated it as a kind of polemical pamphlet à la Céline. Noguez even praised the insightfulness of the novel’s conclusion, writing, “Son utopie n’est là que comme la cité idéale dans la République de Platon... ou comme l’état de nature chez Rousseau... Il s’agit d’une conjecture, d’un point de comparaison imaginaire qui nous rappelle combien notre réalité présente est contingente et pourrait être autre” (Noguez, 1998). Frédéric Badré even went so far as to identify Houellebecq, in an article in *Le Monde* on October 3rd, 1998, as the leading figure in an emerging “postnaturalist” movement in French literature (Badré, 1998). Badré’s analysis was panned for the seeming arrogance with which it suggested that a

new era in French letters was beginning,¹¹ but comparisons with Zola and naturalism have nonetheless been an important part of scholarly reception of Houellebecq's work (as we will see below). In any event, despite support from certain important quarters, Houellebecq's reputation had inevitably become that of France's literary *enfant terrible*. Even the *New York Times*, in November 2000, qualified *The Elementary Particles* (the novel having just then appeared in translation in the United States) as a "deeply repugnant read" (Kakutani, 2000). "[The novel's] intention is so plainly to rile, to epater," wrote one reviewer, "that any objections one might raise feel like further ammunition to its entrenched misanthropy" (Quinn, 2000). The novel did receive positive reviews in other dailies,¹² but the controversial nature of Houellebecq's work was evidently not limited to the rarified air of the Parisian literary milieu.

However unjustified many of these criticisms were, Houellebecq never really recovered from the initial roasting he received during the rentrée littéraire of 1998. *Plateforme*, which was generally better reviewed than *Particules*, nonetheless ignited controversy over its defamatory portrayal of Islam (which I discuss in chapter four)—a controversy that Houellebecq no doubt fueled with his infamous "L'Islam, c'est quand même la religion la plus con" comment to *Lire* in 2001. Houellebecq was brought to trial and acquitted for inciting racial hatred, and even the famous Salman Rushdie, who had suffered similarly for his *Satanic Verses*, came to Houellebecq's aid, writing, "Platform is a good novel and Houellebecq is a fine writer who writes for serious reasons and neither

¹¹ A week later in *Le Monde*, Marc Petit wrote of Badré's article, "...on ne voit là rien d'autre, au premier abord, qu'une tentative assez maladroite de récupération de la Houellebecqmania ambiante à des fins partisanses, celle d'un de ces groupuscules, d'une de ces micro-revues qui prétendent incarner l'esprit du temps avec la risible arrogance des philistins de la gauche hégélienne dont Marx et Engels se sont si joyeusement gaussés dans L'Idéologie allemande" (Petit, 1998).

¹² One such review is found in the *New Statesman*, where reviewer James Harkin praises the novel as a "hugely ambitious novel of ideas" that "sustains our interest by conveying a mounting sense of foreboding, the feeling that something of world-historical importance is about to be disclosed" (Harkin, 2000).

he nor his book deserves to be tarred and feathered” (Rushdie, 2002). Still, this second *affaire Houellebecq* only consolidated the author’s image as an *agent provocateur*; Houellebecq has since published other novels and even won the Prix Goncourt for *La carte et le territoire*, but the image of him as a “shady individual” (Jourde, 2003) is in all likelihood permanent. His friends and supporters—including the aforementioned Dominique Noguez, but also Frédéric Beigbedder, Oliver Bardolle, Philippe Sollers, and the Spaniard Fernando Arrabal, to name a few—are numerous, but the dynamic of Houellebecq’s relationship to the French media and to French literature has generally been one in which a small coterie of writers and intellectuals have done their best to defend Houellebecq against legions of detractors, who are repulsed for one reason or another by the author’s writing. Given the nature of the quarrel, it was no surprise that Houellebecq left France for Ireland as soon as his newfound fortune permitted.

If the Parisian scene has been mostly concerned either with defending or vilifying Houellebecq’s claims to writerly sainthood, the academic arena has generally made better attempts to skirt the issue of the author’s notoriety—though of course with some important exceptions. Houellebecq’s thought moves freely among intellectual, scientific, and literary topics of immense diversity: Structuralism, quantum physics, nineteenth-century utopianism, New Religious Movements—Houellebecq addresses all of these and more, and the critical vectors that scholars have followed have been accordingly myriad. Below is an overview of much of the scholarly discussion that has taken and continues to take place around Houellebecq’s work. Naturally, I cannot treat all of these fine contributions in detail; rather I will attempt, very economically, to give the reader a sense

of what precisely is at stake in Houellebecq scholarship, as well as respond, where possible, to those authors who in my view have had the most important things to say.

Houellebecq à la fac

In her article “*L’Affaire Houellebecq: Ideological Crime and Fin de Millénaire Literary Scandal*,” author Ruth Cruickshank makes the following observation:

The crime [of *The Elementary Particles*] is to challenge the dominant ideology depicted in the novel: the pursuit and production of desire in late capitalist society, an ideological foundation that can never bring satisfaction, but breeds isolation, competition and hatred, and that by investing its intellectual equity in the media and the discourse of the politically correct, ignores the radical potential of progress in the physical sciences (Cruickshank, 2003, p. 113).

Cruickshank’s analysis accomplishes what the French public and press, caught up in the heat of the Houellebecq affair, could not—an explanation that reaches beyond the issue of “soixante-huitard” culture and its consequences and discusses the broader issue of late capitalism and the materialistic, atomized culture it has created. Very few scholars—two important exceptions being Jerry Varsava (2005a, 2005b) and Seth Armus (1999), who see in Houellebecq a dangerous anti-liberal and enemy of Western (and specifically American) civilization—would put up any resistance to this sort of reading. One thing that virtually *everyone can agree on* is that Houellebecq’s depiction of capitalist society, in which even sexual relationships are ruled by market logic, is a meaningful contribution to our understanding of the downside of liberalism—and this is no doubt true. But Houellebecq’s politics are famously ambivalent. However “revolutionary” he may seem in his treatment of capitalism, his comments on women, Islam, homosexuals, and multiculturalism frequently give him the aura not of someone who hates liberalism, but

who simply *hates everything*, regardless of political implications. Thus, however much we may all agree with Houellebecq on the subject of liberal civilization, many scholars have apparently felt goaded by the general ambiguity of the author's political commitments into condemning him in one way or another.

One author who has followed this path is Sabine van Wesemael, who writes in her article "L'ère du vide,"

Seule une réforme morale peut guérir le monde du mal dont il souffre présentement. L'auteur se complaît à proclamer une réaction néo-conservatrice et plaide pour des aménagements au libéralisme tant économique que sexuel. Seul un retour aux normes et valeurs traditionnelles... et une croyance infinie en l'importance de la science et de la technique pour l'amélioration de l'espèce humaine peuvent sauver notre société expirante. Houellebecq est réactionnaire. Il n'est pas surprenant que sa critique ait éveillée dans les milieux extrémistes de droite un favorable écho (van Wesemael, 2005, 89).

Houellebecq's status as a "reactionary" is not so clear as van Wesemael would have us believe—in any case, this is an issue that I will return to shortly. Numerous authors have been similarly critical of Houellebecq's dubious politics, as well as of his cynicism, and at least on my analysis of the relevant scholarly literature, such criticism may even be the dominant theme—though only marginally. For example, while one author writes that the xenophobic and racist elements of Houellebecq's work might easily be interpreted "au premier degré" (Clément, 2006, p. 99), another suggests that sexuality in the author's novels is "une chose de marketing... le 'cul' sert à faire vendre le livre" (Schuerewegen, 2004, p. 47). Stefan Beck (2006) calls Houellebecq a coward for allowing himself to be governed by the bleak worldview his fiction offers;¹³ Martin Crowley worries whether Houellebecq's depiction of feminists who have been "ruined" by psychotherapy can be

¹³ Beck's article is not scholarly, but given its sustained exploration of the relationship between Houellebecq the person and the author's fiction, I believe his contribution merits being considered distinct from the typical literary review.

“securely qualified” by the narrative context of a novel such as *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (2002, p. 25). Even scholars who attempt a less braying assessment of political incorrectness in Houellebecq’s writing participate in a kind of implicit reprimand. Isabelle Tremblay (2006), who addresses the use of stereotyping in character formation, and Jérôme Meizoz (2003), who analyzes the logic of scandal that lends Houellebecq’s fiction its provocative qualities, are two examples. Some writers are blunt: Robert Burns writes of *Les particules élémentaires*, “The book disgorges whole passages that are almost unbearable to read,” (Burns, 2002, p. 158) while William Cloonan claims that Houellebecq is nothing more than a “clever marketer” who “deftly sells a product which is some sort of volatile mixture of writer and novel” (Cloonan, 2006, p. 57). This enumeration is not intended to be exhaustive, and naturally I do not mean to suggest that such academic scowling is unjustified, for certainly all of the authors just mentioned make important contributions to Houellebecq scholarship above and beyond the realm of “moral administration” (as I termed such critique in my introduction.) I merely mean to point out that scholars are not immune to the “mediatic residue” that still clings to Houellebecq’s image, and no doubt it will be a long time before anyone (including myself) is able to speak academically about Houellebecq without feeling the need to say something negative.

Beyond this more narrow concern, however, Houellebecq’s work has drawn significant attention from writers interested in the connections between literature, science, intellectual history, and related subjects. Much of my discussion in this dissertation revolves around Houellebecq’s engagement with science and nineteenth-century French utopian philosophy, and in these domains a number of scholars have made outstanding

contributions. Articles by Marc Atallah (2006) and Christian Monnin (2001) discuss Houellebecq's employment of quantum theory in his fiction and the ways in which it informs the character development of Bruno and Michel; contributions from Kim Doré (2002), Laurence Dahan-Gaida (2003), and Ruth Amar (2007) follow along similar lines, addressing issues of genetic and cultural evolution, the limits of human identity in the context of genetic engineering, and the experimental use of scientific theory in the construction of a naturalist narrative. Articles by Jean-François Chassay (2005) and Maud Granger Rémy (2007) discuss, respectively, the famous "corpuscules de Krause," which inform much of the discourse on sexuality in *Les particules élémentaires*, and the relationship between posthumanism and tourism in *Plateforme*. Other contributions in the domain of intellectual history have touched on the affinities between Houellebecq's writing and the work of Auguste Comte (Chabert, 2002; Sartori, 2004), Arthur Schopenhauer (Place-Verghnes, 2007; Wagner, 2007), Gilles Lipovetsky (van Wesemael, 2005), and Aldous Huxley (Holzer, 2003). Additionally, in the realm of literary history, authors such as Sandrine Rabousseau (2007) and Jerry Varsava (2005b) have pointed out Houellebecq's creative debt to Émile Zola and to literary naturalism; Jean-Louis Cornille (2007) has written of the similarities between *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *L'étranger*; Julia Pröll (2007) has demonstrated the likeness between Houellebecq's poetry and that of Charles Baudelaire; Emer O'Beirne (2006) and François Ricard (1999) have discussed Houellebecq's relationship with such contemporary writers and intellectuals as Marc Augé, Marie Darrieussecq, Jean Echenoz, Philip Muray, and Benoît Duteurtre; and David Rabouin (2000) draws parallels between the work of Houellebecq and his contemporary, Maurice G. Dantec.

In the area of book-length works, monographs from Sabine van Wesemael (2005b), Murielle Lucie Clément (2010, 2007, 2003) and John McCann (2010) address, respectively, the question and problematic nature of Houellebecq's immense popularity, the sexual and pornographic tropes of the author's fiction, and existential issues related to the concept of emptiness. Work in French by Bruno Viard (2008) treats the question of Houellebecq's harsh portrayal of '68 culture, while François Meyronnis (2007) in *De l'extermination considérée comme un des beaux arts* connects the author's fiction with Jonathan Littell's prix Goncourt-winning *Les Bienveillantes*. Many other contributions have been made to Houellebecq scholarship, and naturally it would be impossible to address in detail the specific concerns that these and others cited above raise. What emerges at any rate from such analyses is the tremendous depth of Houellebecq's thought, as well as the seemingly inevitable observation that any author whose work is able to evoke parallels with such diverse figures as Baudelaire, Zola, Camus, Schopenhauer, Comte, and Huxley, who employs scientific theory with such liberality and awareness, and who manages to provoke scandal on a regular basis in a literary milieu not at all unaccustomed to it, is worthy of the scholarly attention that Houellebecq has received, regardless of our feelings about the moral or political qualities of his writing.¹⁴

Before moving on to an assessment of previous critical receptions in view of my own remarks in this dissertation, I would like to address in some detail comments that van Wesemael has made concerning Houellebecq's "reactionary" traits. Van Wesemael

¹⁴ Other significant contributions that I do not mention above are stylistic analyses of Houellebecq's writing by authors Olivier Bessard-Banquy (2007), cited in the introduction, and Robert Dion and Elisabeth Haghebaert (2001), the latter being in my view the most authoritative examination of Houellebecq's style currently available. Articles dealing with issues of sexuality include pieces by Nathalie Dumas (2007), Franc Schuerewegen (2004), and Madeleine Berne (2002).

is perhaps the scholar who has been most instrumental in creating “Houellebecq studies”; in addition to her book *Michel Houellebecq, le plaisir du texte* and an edited volume of essays published in 2004, the collection *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe* (2007), co-edited with Murielle Lucie Clément, is undoubtedly the authoritative tome of scholarly work dedicated to Houellebecq available today. That van Wesemael should label Houellebecq a reactionary is thus significant; it is also, I believe, a simplification (as contributions to the Yale French Studies volume *Turns to the Right?* which I discuss in my concluding chapter, suggests), which stands in need of nuancing, if not simply repudiation.

Van Wesemael writes that Houellebecq is a reactionary because he believes, in her view, that only a return to traditional values can save humanity, and specifically Western culture, from moral and material collapse (a statement which, we should note, implies a clear definition of what it means to be reactionary) (van Wesemael, 2005a, p. 89). In reality, however, Houellebecq is often as far from reactionary as a person can be: at least in *Les particules élémentaires*, he points not to a return to some erstwhile and defunct system of social organization, but rather to the creation of a scientific utopia based on the philosophical principles of Comtian positivism—in other words, a social system of almost pure invention. Houellebecq is, by his own admission, a committed atheist, and it seems difficult to imagine in what sense a person could be a reactionary without claiming at least some alignment with one of the extant European faith traditions. Indeed, if we are to locate the basis of “traditional values” in the moral prescriptions of Catholic French civilization, then it becomes very unclear how Houellebecq, given his persistent agnosticism, could be truly “reacting” to secularizing tendencies at play in

contemporary France.¹⁵ If this were not enough, he even goes so far as to refute bluntly the charge of reaction in a recent interview with the *Paris Review*:

What I think, fundamentally, is that you can't do anything about major societal changes. It may be regrettable that the family unit is disappearing. You could argue that it increases human suffering. But regrettable or not, there's nothing we can do. That's the difference between me and a reactionary. I don't have any interest in turning back the clock because I don't believe it can be done. You can only observe and describe. I've always liked Balzac's very insulting statement that the only purpose of the novel is to show the disasters produced by the changing of values. He's exaggerating in an amusing way. But that's what I do: I show the disasters produced by the liberalization of values (Houellebecq, 2010b).

What Houellebecq imagines for Europe in *Les particules élémentaires*, far from a return to a previous dispensation, is a movement beyond Western humanism altogether. It will not be the Catholic Church or any other former moral and spiritual anchor of civilization that reemerges to rejuvenate Western consciousness, but rather, as Houellebecq suggests in *Lanzarote* and *La possibilité d'une île*, we will much more likely witness the birth of a new religion able to reconcile scientific knowledge with entrenched human desires for solidarity, purpose, and immortality. Even in *La carte et le territoire*, where France, in an effort to avoid the economic calamities associated with industrialism, returns to a more traditional and agricultural way of life, there is no mention of renewal of traditionally Christian and specifically Catholic worldviews. Furthermore, in what respect is the advocacy of values and ideals such as community, selflessness, transcendence, and immortality truly reactionary? If Houellebecq is in fact bent on promoting “traditional

¹⁵ Thus the problematic nature of Lindenberg's comments in *Le rappel à l'ordre*, in which the author writes, “La conclusion explicite chez un Houellebecq ou un Dantec, c'est qu'il faut un nouveau ‘pouvoir spirituel’ qui chassera les marchands du Temple et refera du savoir et de la culture un sacerdoce. Comme chez Comte, cité par Houellebecq, la fascination pour un catholicisme de combat en découle...” (Lindenberg, 2002, p. 23) Houellebecq is evidently concerned, as Comte was, with the “staying power,” so to speak, of a completely secular civilization, but what this has to do with a militant Catholicism—a religion of which Houellebecq is not a member and whose promises of immortality Comte condemned as “puerile illusion” (see chapter five)—is totally unclear in Lindenberg's case.

values” through his fiction—which seems doubtful, at any rate—how is he doing anything other than what the average preacher, rabbi, or imam does every weekend in front of his or her congregation? Surely community and unselfish behavior are not bad things; surely belief in transcendence and eternal life have not become so retrograde that we consider them dangerous reactions to a more virtuous, secular society. To meet van Wesemael halfway—it is undeniable that Houellebecq, at places, appears to believe that some kind of return to a more “moral” (in whatever sense) society is desirable. But, unless we are prepared to *radically historicize* moral values and decide that seemingly simple desires for solidarity and unselfishness have no universal designation whatsoever, the charge of reaction must be issued with great discretion, lest the Houellebecq of scandal and media polemic become the definitive Houellebecq of academic scholarship.

The Religion Question

It will have been noticed by now that none of the contributions I have just discussed, despite their merit, address the religious concerns that Houellebecq’s writing raises. The association of the reactionary with a traditional religious worldview appears to me to be unavoidable, but perhaps to an author such as van Wesemael the reactionary has a more purely political connotation. So be it—all the more reason, in that case, to move in the direction I am suggesting. What has been said about Houellebecq’s relationship with the “religious” is typically oblique and never very long-winded. Besides Chabert’s (2002) lengthy analysis of Comte’s influence on *Les particules élémentaires*, the only contributions that I have discovered dealing directly with religion are Vincent Lloyd’s article “Michel Houellebecq and the Theological Virtues,” which

suggests a post-secular or post-capitalist reorientation of the traditional theological virtues faith, hope, and love in *La possibilité d'une île* (Lloyd, 2009, p. 85), and a few comments by Philippe Sollers in a 2006 interview with the review *Ligne de risque*. While it might seem, at least initially, that speculation on the reasons for scholarly disregard of the religion question would be a less than intellectual exercise, it is worth pointing to two likely explanations. The first, in the case of France, is that secular and laical discourses at the state level are an obvious hindrance to the discussion of theological questions in public institutions such as universities. That an institution like the Sorbonne, for instance, has no religious studies department seems a clear enough indicator of the prevailing attitude. The second explanation, which involves academic settings outside of France, is the general suspicion in which religious worldviews are often held in humanistic disciplines—at least officially. Some of this has to do with commitment to some or another form of Marxism, some of it to do with broad allegiances to critical approaches to the analysis of social institutions and literary texts. Whatever the case may be—and in the end it really does not matter what the reason is—the intellectual atmosphere that results is one in which religion is viewed not as something insidious or primitive, but simply as something unimportant and of little explanatory power. My hope is that this dissertation, which insists so heavily on religious and theological questions, will provoke some added interest in this particular element of Houellebecq's writing. As I will make clear throughout, the author's work is rich in religious imagination, and this fact will have to be accounted for in order for the putative field of "Houellebecq studies" to be whole.

I would like to present, before ending this chapter, the few comments that Philippe Sollers makes about the role of religion in Houellebecq's fiction, since they point to the very exegetical gap that I just discussed above. Sollers' interview, like so many of his remarks, is appropriately bombastic and peremptory, and much of it involves an inexplicable hostility to the treatment of sexuality in American literature and, conversely, Houellebecq's seeming mastery of it (Sollers, 2006a, pp. 21-22, 23). Sollers does see fit, however, to point out that *La possibilité d'une île* "propose une nouvelle religion," and that "il se présente comme un évangile un peu spécial. Personne, dans la critique, ne semble avoir repéré cet aspect » (Sollers 2006a, p. 24). Thanks to Sollers and to *Ligne de risque* for having pointed out the obvious! Sollers appeared, in any event, to have recently been preoccupied by questions of religion and society; his 2006 novel *Une vie divine* was as concerned with secular (or post-secular) civilization as is Houellebecq in *Possibilité*, though in Sollers' case the solution to the problem moves along a Nietzschean rather than posthuman vector. Perhaps the most interesting moment—at least for Houellebecq admirers—in the novel is a scene in which the protagonist, a kind of reincarnated Nietzsche for the twenty-first century, meets "Daniel" in a Parisian hotel. No one has yet pointed out the blatant, somewhat lampooning intertextuality of this passage with *La possibilité d'une île*. Here, at any rate, is what Sollers' protagonist has to say about Daniel:

Daniel est le type même du nihilisme actif et professionnel d'aujourd'hui, pornographe et sentimental. Il reste obsédé par la baise, frémit à la vue de la moindre jeune salope locale, a peur de vieillir, poursuit un rêve d'immortalité génétique, et a même donné son ADN, pour être cloné, à l'Église de la Vie Universelle (l'EVU), laquelle est partie à l'assaut des comptes en banque des déprimés du monde entier, tentés par le suicide et la réincarnation corporelle...

Il me demande si je crois à la vie éternelle, et il sait que je vais lui répondre bof, que c'est là encore un fantasme humain, trop humain, que l'éternel retour est tout autre chose, qu'il vaudrait mieux parler d'éternité vécue. Il me jette un drôle de regard, à la fois plombé, apeuré, vide...

J'ai été content de revoir Daniel, son courage et sa détestation provocatrice, glauque, drôle et fanatique du genre humain. (Sollers, 2006b, pp. 348-350)

Is this simply Sollers' payback for Houellebecq's spoof of him in *Les particules élémentaires*? No doubt in part—but the engagement with nihilism and the despair of materialism is every bit as serious, despite the underlying humor, as what we find in Houellebecq. What follows in this dissertation will indicate just how deep such engagement goes.

CHAPTER II:

CAN MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ SAVE THE WORLD?

Materialism, Positivism, Quantum Physics, and Posthuman Utopia

Sans nul doute, le XXe siècle restera comme l'âge du triomphe dans l'esprit du grand public d'une explication scientifique du monde, associée par lui à une ontologie matérialiste et au principe de déterminisme local (Houellebecq, 2009, p. 152).

Michel Houellebecq is an author as interested in ideas as he is in aesthetics. Even as early as *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, a novel that for the most part spares its readers the extended, sweepingly ideological soliloquies of later novels, Houellebecq gives us much more than the story of a depressed, sexually alienated computer technician forced to roam the French provinces with the repugnant Tisserand. Despite a memorable vomiting scene early on and a comically abortive attempt at murdering two fornicating adolescents as they couple on the beach—a scene which, we ought to note, comes off as a burlesque inversion of the Arab's murder in *L'étranger* (Cornille, 2007)—what is ultimately most striking in Houellebecq's first novel are the narrator's rancor-laden diatribes on such subjects as capitalism, contemporary sexuality, and psychoanalysis. Admittedly, the *discours* of this first novel—even the famous “le libéralisme sexuel produit des phénomènes de *paupérisation absolue*” (Houellebecq, 1994, pp. 114-115) speech that follows Tisserand's confession that he feels like “une grenouille dans un bocal” (Houellebecq, 1994, p. 113)—have a more personal flavor than what we encounter in a text such as *Les particules élémentaires*.¹⁶ Houellebecq's later novels

¹⁶ In his review, “90% hateful,” of *The Possibility of an Island*, John Updike writes that *Extension du domaine de la lutte* is “less idea-driven than experience-driven” and, “...pessimistic reflections... are overlaid with a personal development: in the wake of a professional colleague's sudden death in an auto accident, and under the strain of erotic frustration and alcohol, cigarette, and sedative abuse, the hero of

have plenty of plot, but they are saturated with ideological rants that often reduce their fictional utterers to mouthpieces for the author's opinions. In *Extension*, however, the narrator's monological eruptions and his life appear to mirror each other well enough: his hated ex-wife really was in psychoanalysis, he truly hasn't had sex for two years, etc. Still, given Houellebecq's subsequently acquired reputation as a *roman à thèse* novelist, and given that his not-so-fictional *discours* about Islam, sex tourism, women, etc., have caused him the most trouble in the French media, no one should be surprised if the markedly less ideological *Extension du domaine de la lutte* ends up being remembered more for the ideas it presents than for the plot and the characters that do the presenting.

Strictly speaking, there is nothing wrong with being an ideas person, even for a novelist. No one throws down *Thérèse Raquin* in disgust simply because Zola used the novel to make a point about social and genetic determinism (even if, at the time, the author's writing generated its share of controversy). Similarly, no one suggests that we remove Jean-Paul Sartre from the Canon because *La nausée* is a fictional *mise en scène* of much of the philosophical argument of *Being and Nothingness*. In Houellebecq's case, attempts to criticize the author for insisting on certain ideological or philosophical premises at the expense of plot, character, or language might seem like little more than the product of structuralist reflexes. According to theory icons such as Barthes or Foucault, authors are supposed to channel broader public discourses, not present them explicitly. Certainly they are not supposed to be *dragged into court* for restating as

'Whatever' suffers a breakdown... We experience the hero's effort to rise into happiness as poignantly sincere, and his estrangement as a personal aberration rather than the universe's fault. Hereafter, in his novels, Houellebecq's will to generalize smothers the real world under a blanket condemnation..." (Updike, 2006)

personal conviction the anti-Islamic diatribe of a fictional character.¹⁷ Beyond his evident title of *agent provocateur extraordinaire*, Houellebecq is also an iconoclast for postmodern critical sensibilities.¹⁸ The two *affaires Houellebecq*, which followed the publication of *Les particules élémentaires* and *Plateforme* and concerned the degree to which Houellebecq had used those novels as a platform for his own opinions, are exemplary of this iconoclasm.¹⁹ About the first novel, Liesbeth Korthals Altes writes,

Les remous que provoquèrent *Les Particules élémentaires* dans la critique en France et à l'étranger ont eu ceci de piquant que la question de la position de l'auteur, sinon de ses intentions et de sa morale, si soigneusement évacuées par la théorie littéraire dominante, reprenait tous ses droits. Bien peu avant, de nombreux critiques occidentaux s'étaient étonnés de la fatwa prononcée contre Rushdie à propos de ses *Satanic Verses*: comment pouvait-on à ce point confondre littérature et prises de position publiques, et remettre en question l'autonomie du domaine esthétique? Or voici qu'en plein monde postmoderne, présumé en proie à une esthétisation tous azimuths, se présente cette occasion de réfléchir sur la dimension morale et idéologique du roman (Altes, 2004, p. 29).

¹⁷ My reference here is to the Egyptian biochemist in *Plateforme* who tells Michel, "L'islam ne pouvait naître que dans un désert stupide, au milieu de Bédouins crasseux qui n'avaient rien d'autre à faire—pardonnez-moi—que d'enculer leur chameaux" (Houellebecq, 2001a, p. 179).

¹⁸ Houellebecq's criticism of the structuralist school is most pronounced in his *Lettre à Lakis Proguidis*, in which he ties the twentieth-century fascination with "texts" and "writing" (écriture) (Houellebecq, 2009, p. 153) to the rise of materialism as the prevailing Western worldview. Houellebecq argues that the reduction of human behavior and psychology to "des concentrations d'hormones et de neuromédiateurs" has in effect destroyed the notion of character that novels relied on in the past (Houellebecq, 2009, pp. 152-153). In the wake of this reduction, nothing is left to discuss but textuality. Houellebecq condemns this development, writing, "Le spectacle à son côté triste. Je n'ai jamais pu, pour ma part, assister sans un serrement de cœur à la débauche de techniques mise en œuvre par tel ou tel 'formaliste-Minuit' pour un résultat final aussi mince. Pour tenir le coup, je me suis souvent répété cette phrase de Schopenhauer : 'La première—et pratiquement la seule—condition d'un bon style, c'est d'avoir quelque chose à dire.' Avec sa brutalité caractéristique, cette phrase peut aider. Par exemple, au cours d'une conversation littéraire, lorsque le mot d'écriture est prononcé, on sait que c'est le moment de se détendre un peu. De regarder autour de soi, de commander une nouvelle bière" (Houellebecq, 2009, pp. 153-154). Instead, citing the work of Thomas Mann and Dostoyevsky, Houellebecq asserts, "...le roman est un lieu naturel pour l'expression de débats ou de déchirements philosophiques" (Houellebecq, 2009, p. 152).

¹⁹ In a November 1998 opinion piece published in *Le Monde*, Marion van Renterghem writes of *Les particules élémentaires*, "À force, on ne sait plus de quoi il s'agit: de littérature, d'idéologie, de procès politique ou de posture. D'un roman, de déclarations provocantes jetées au fil d'interviews infinies, de mises en accusation publiques appelant la légitime défense, ou d'une drôle de manière de tenir sa cigarette, entre le majeur et l'annulaire." Citing the novel's seeming apology for cloning, eugenics, and genetic engineering, the author adds, "Tout un programme dont on ne serait pas sûr que l'auteur n'y adhère pas. Neutralité du style, réduction des personnages à l'état de particules, confusion progressive des deux héros demi-frères et du narrateur clone contribuent à susciter les soupçons sur l'origine, dans le roman, des discours."

An easy objection to structuralist readings is that they deny too much in the way of the author's agency: certainly the discursive content of an author's work comes from his or her interaction and engagement with the external world (for where else could it come from?), but to deify language, which possesses neither consciousness nor will, as a prime mover at the expense of authorial volition seems like a move in the direction of more obscurantism, not less. Happily, Houellebecq has exploded a great number of these biases, even if he has had to resort to scandal to do so. Scandal requires an agent—a veritable speaker, not some derisory “function” of language. So long as literary scandal continues to exist, the author has a pulse. We have writers like Houellebecq to thank for this peculiar renaissance.

As I indicated in the introduction, the guiding idea of much, if not all, of Houellebecq's work is the author's particular reaction to and assessment of contemporary materialist culture, especially as it is experienced through the cultural lens of consumerism. Few authors writing today display such an unflagging preoccupation with death and extinction, physical decline, suicide, determinism, and atheism as does Michel Houellebecq, and indeed at no point in the Houellebecquian corpus does the reader encounter any meaningful or unqualified reference to transcendence or “spirit.” Typically the only remedy Houellebecq seems able to suggest for the prospect of aging, death, and physical decline is suicide or, bleaker still, the outright disappearance of the human race. The following passage from *Les particules élémentaires*, the novel that offers by far the most sustained exploration and critique of materialism's cultural consequences, is as good a rendering as any of the Houellebecquian worldview:

Les éléments de la conscience contemporaine ne sont plus adaptés à notre condition mortelle. Jamais, à aucune époque et dans aucune autre

civilisation, on n'a pensé aussi longuement et aussi constamment à son âge; chacun a dans la tête une perspective d'avenir simple: le moment viendra pour lui où la somme des jouissances physiques qui lui restent à attendre de la vie deviendra inférieure à la somme des douleurs... Cet examen rationnel des jouissances et des douleurs, que chacun, tôt ou tard, est conduit à faire, débouche inéluctablement à partir d'un certain âge sur le suicide... On peut également relever, comme un trait symptomatique, la réaction du public face à la perspective d'un attentat terroriste: dans la quasi-totalité des cas les gens préféreraient être tués sur le coup plutôt que d'être mutilés, ou même défigurés. En partie, bien sûr, parce qu'ils en ont un peu marre de la vie; mais surtout parce que rien, y compris la mort, ne leur paraît aussi terrible que de vivre dans un corps amoindri (Houellebecq, 1998a, pp 308-309).

In a world where the trials and sufferings of earthly existence are fleeting and rewarded by eternal bliss in the life to come, a person may sustain the misery of a damaged body in anticipation of his or her divine recompense. In Houellebecq's post-religious, materialist universe, however, the earthbound sufferer cannot expect any heavenly relief—there is only matter, after which, extinction.²⁰

In much the same way that naturalism furnished the baseline proviso of Zola's creative work, or that realism supplied the palette with which Flaubert painted in the meticulous detail of his novels, materialism represents the *fundamental experimental condition* of Houellebecq's fiction. Most, if not all, of the pathos of the author's major characters (Bruno's sexual obsession and hatred of his mother, Djerzinski's anti-humanist and anti-human creed, Daniel's fear of aging and impotence, the sexual alienation of the narrator in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and Michel in *Plateforme*, and even the resigned morbidity of the character Houellebecq in *La carte et le territoire*) is informed

²⁰ We find a more character-specific rendering of the Houellebecquian worldview in the author's description of the repulsive Brigitte Bardot (not the actress): "...Sortir Bardot aurait demandé une force morale bien supérieure à celle dont je pouvais, à l'époque, me targuer. Car non seulement elle était laide mais elle était méchante. Touchée de plein fouet par la libération sexuelle (c'était le tout début des années 80, le SIDA n'existait pas encore), elle ne pouvait évidemment se prévaloir d'une quelconque éthique de la virginité. Elle était en outre beaucoup trop intelligente et trop lucide pour expliquer son état par une 'influence judéo-chrétienne'—ses parents, en toute hypothèse, étaient agnostiques. Toute échappatoire lui était donc interdite" (Houellebecq, 1994, p. 104).

by the same terror of separation, physical decline, and death—all sentiments fueled by the obsessive awareness that “this is all there is.” The first reading of Houellebecq is a *materialist reading*: outside of this basic philosophical assumption about the nature of reality, it becomes very difficult to lend a sense of thematic and intellectual unity to the author’s work.

As a philosophical concept, materialism connotes two methodologically distinct but formally and ideologically related domains. The first, attached to the continental tradition, evokes Marxism, class consciousness, and the argument that human consciousness is determined by material and historical conditions that are beyond our immediate control. The second, which hails from the analytic tradition but is traced all the way back to Descartes, relates strictly to the nature of the mind in itself and foregoes the historical and economic considerations of Marxist theory. It is this second theory, which we may refer to as mind-body materialism or physicalism (in order to distinguish it from historical materialism), which is of interest in regard to Houellebecq. In the physicalist view, supposedly “immaterial” entities (such as spirit, soul, gods, etc.) are pre-modern, pre-rational fantasies, and we have only Descartes and his disastrous substance dualism to thank for them.²¹ For the mind-body materialist, Descartes’ “immaterial” mind is in fact nothing more than the product of the brain: as the brain dies, so does the mind. Mind-body materialism thus explains away traditionally immaterial entities as no more than complex arrangements of “elementary particles,” and in doing so

²¹ Descartes famously proposed that mind and body were composed of two intrinsically different substances, one material and the other immaterial. Contemporary philosophy of mind is strongly opposed to Cartesian substance dualism, in particular because no theory of the natural world exists that could explain the interaction of the two radically different substances.

rules out all talk of such optimistic phenomena as spirit, soul, and survival of bodily death.

Strangely enough, Houellebecq denies that he is a materialist, despite the fact that his novels are in large part explorations of the social and psychological consequences of the physicalist worldview. Claiming that the very concept of matter is a metaphysical fantasy, which came to replace God with the arrival of modern science,²² Houellebecq argues that discoveries that have emerged in the twentieth century from quantum physics (phenomena such as action at a distance, non-separability, and complementarity) require us to abandon the notion of matter entirely. More important still, the author suggests that his utopian vision of humanity's future—specifically the race of genetically enhanced clones that appear at the end of *Les particules élémentaires*—may offer a *solution* to the existential dilemmas that materialism poses, if only by allowing us to surpass humanity in its current state. However, as we will see from a critical examination of Houellebecq's philosophical leanings in light of twentieth-century mind-body philosophy, the author's views hardly fall outside the broader scope of contemporary materialist theory. Significantly, Houellebecq not only mistakes the seeming insolubility of the metaphysical conundrums of mind-body philosophy with evidence against materialism, but he also confuses Newtonian mechanics (a model of physical reality that he opposes to the “non-local” determinism of quantum physics) with materialism writ large. In doing so, Houellebecq envisions a post-materialist future that has in fact not moved beyond materialism at all. The degree to which Houellebecquian utopia succeeds in solving the problems it sets out to address is uncertain.

²² "L'homme à un certain stade a besoin de métaphores, et de légendes. La matière elle-même était une légende nécessaire, pour en finir avec Dieu" (Houellebecq, 2008, p. 154).

Mind-Body Materialism: An Overview

In my own experience, whenever I order a steak in France I usually only get two choices for how the meat will be prepared: well done (*bien cuit*) or bloody (*saignant*). Each option has its advantages and disadvantages: certainly the bloody steak will be more delicious, but it will be harder to digest; the well-done steak, on the other hand, will be easier on my metabolism, but not quite so tasty. I can choose as I want, either for flavor or ease of digestion, but in the end I am still left with this problem: ultimately, I don't really even want a steak—I just want to live forever.

Mind-body materialism places its adherent in a similar predicament. Like a French steak, this philosophy comes in two distinct forms—reductive and non-reductive. Reductive mind-body materialism insists on a relation of *strict identity* between brain states and mental states: supposedly “mental” aspects of mind are nothing over and above certain discrete brain states. To cite a famous example, being in pain simply *is* having the C-fibers of your brain stimulated.²³ Non-reductive theories say otherwise. On the non-reductive account, the mental exists, undeniably. Pain is a qualitative experience that is not strictly identical with neuronal firings in the brain, even if those neuronal firings are responsible for the experience of being in pain. The non-reductive materialist therefore argues that conscious experience is an *emergent property* of discrete brain states and by that right cannot be identical with them.

Each of these theories has its strengths and drawbacks. Non-reductive materialism affirms the intuitive distinction between the brain and the mind. Yes, our brain is responsible for our experience, but nothing in a brain looks like consciousness, emotion, personality, etc.—thus the brain must *give rise* to these phenomena. The

²³ Many philosophers have used this example. See Puccetti (1977) for a bibliography.

reductive materialist, however, is ready with this rejoinder: if mental states are not physical brain states, then what are they? What are they made of, exactly? And the non-reductive materialist will have to respond that she just doesn't know, but that the reality of the mental demonstrates that the reduction of the mind to mere brain ignores the reality of conscious experience. We thus have a quandary: problematically "immaterial" mental states as a product of brain states, or purely physical brain states that don't look at all like mental states. In the first case, we retain the reality of the mental, though we have no ability to say exactly what the mental *is*. In the second case, we can say quite easily what the mental is—it is the brain—but *how* exactly the mental is the brain is a mystery. I, the materialist, can pick as I prefer, but each option has its problems. And worst is that, in the end, I don't really even want a theory of how the brain produces the mind—I just want to live forever.

Mind-body materialism became the vogue in analytic philosophy around the middle of the twentieth century. Bertrand Russell had already opened the door to reductions of the mental with his theory of *neutral monism*,²⁴ but it was not until the publication of Gilbert Ryle's monolithic *The Concept of Mind* that materialism became the reigning orthodoxy. As Ryle famously stated, Descartes' substance dualism was the myth of the "ghost in the machine" (Ryle, 2009, p. 5), and any philosopher foolish enough to uphold a substantive distinction between mind and body was simply making a category mistake. To cite Ryle's memorable example, such an error is comparable to a

²⁴ According to Russell's neutral monism, the basic substance of reality is neither mental nor material, but is rather neutral between the two. In other words, both mental and physical realities emerge from a more basic substance. Though the theory appears to sidestep materialism by arguing for neutrality, it nonetheless practices a sustained reduction of the mental. Consequently, it may be possible to draw some limited link between neutral monism and identity and eliminativist theories of mind, which reduce/eliminate the mental in favor of the material.

person who visits all the buildings on a college campus but then asks “But where is the University” (Ryle, 2009, p. 6)? The university and the university’s buildings (library, classrooms, student life center, etc.) are not different objects but rather belong to different *logical categories*. Likewise with mind and body, the seeming difference between the two terms is in reality only a difference in category, not in kind: for both mind and body are in the end physical entities.

Later materialists such as J.J.C. Smart (1959) would build on the groundwork that Ryle had laid in order to produce the *identity theory of mind*, according to which mental states are strictly identical with brain states (the aforementioned reductive materialism). To accomplish the seemingly difficult task of reducing the mental to the physical, identity theorists in the late 1950s would rely on a behaviorist concept of mind, by which they understood behaviors taken to indicate “subjective” experiences to be external manifestations of initially internal responses to stimuli. For example, if I scream “ouch” when you prick me with a pin, you, the pricker, will probably take my reaction as a kind of report of my inner experience of pain—that is, I am telling you “hey, that hurt!” From a common sense point of view, my utterance points to a subjective experience that intervenes between the stimulus—the pinprick—and my physical reaction to the sensation. However, a traditional identity theorist will argue that no such report actually took place. My screaming “ouch” was just another element in a series of physical reactions initiated by the stimulus. My experience may feel “mental,” but in reality my indication of my discomfort is no indication at all—it is, in fact, no different from giving a start or jerking my hand away from the site of the prick.²⁵ Thus the existence of a

²⁵ “Suppose I report that I have at this moment a roundish, blurry-edged after-image which is yellowish toward its edge and is orange towards its centre. What is it that I am reporting? One answer to this

subjective experience intervening between stimulus and response can be ruled out. With such a reformulation of the nature of reaction to stimulus, identity theorists were able to make influential arguments in favor of reductionism.

The 1960s and 1970s would, however, see a remarkable shift away from behaviorist thinking. By the end of the 1950s, Noam Chomsky had already thrown the behaviorist school into disarray with the theory of “deep structure,”²⁶ and philosophers of mind would follow suite with spirited defenses of the irreducible nature of the mental. In the most famous example, Thomas Nagel argued that the identity theorists’ claim that mind and brain were the same thing was simply unintelligible. If a mind is nothing over and above chemical processes in a brain, then physical understanding of, say, a bat brain should tell us everything we want to know about being a bat. But is that really so? Surely a patient neurologist can explain to me what exactly is going on in the brain of a bat while it is echolocating—but does the fact that I understand the nature of these physical processes mean that I know *what it is like* to be bat? Of course it doesn’t. How the physical happenings in a bat brain and a bat’s experience can be identical is totally mysterious. As Nagel writes, “If we acknowledge that a physical theory of mind must account for the subjective character of experience, we must admit that no presently available conception gives us a clue how this could be done” (Nagel, 1974, p. 445). While subsequent theorists such Paul Churchland (1988) and Daniel Dennett (2006) have attempted to spoil the intuitive appeal of non-reductive theories by recourse to some

question may be that I am not reporting anything, that when I say that it looks to me as though there is a roundish yellowy orange patch of light on the wall I am expressing some sort of *temptation*, the temptation to say that there *is* a roundish yellowy orange patch on the wall... Similarly, when I ‘report’ a pain, I am not really reporting anything... but am doing a sophisticated sort of wince” (Smart, 1959, p. 141).

²⁶ Noam Chomsky, "A Review of B. F. Skinner's Verbal Behavior," *Language*, 35, No. 1 (1959), 26-58. Available online at <http://www.chomsky.info/articles/1967----.htm>.

admittedly very clever arguments,²⁷ the objections to mind-brain identity raised by philosophers such as Nagel and others²⁸ can appear as so many insurmountable barriers on the philosophical horizon. Certain philosophers are content simply to accept the mystery and admit that perhaps we will never know exactly how the trick is worked.²⁹

It is conceivable that the human mind does not possess the necessary conceptual tools to grasp the nature of the mind-brain relation. But if the ultimate nature of that relation is off-limits to human reason, does this mean we should give up on the practical work of trying to understand the mind? Not at all. There exists a third route, which avoids the seemingly irresolvable quarrel between reductive and non-reductive materialism: functionalism.

As a pragmatic rather than metaphysical theory, functionalism is not so much concerned with contesting the materialism of twentieth-century theories of mind—for the former is, at least implicitly, a physicalist theory—as it is with giving an account of the mental regardless of whatever substances happen to compose it. For a functionalist,

²⁷ Paul Churchland, the foremost proponent of *eliminative materialism*, sidesteps the problem of reduction by claiming that “subjective” states like “belief,” “happiness,” “joy,” etc., are erroneous descriptions of the human mind and must be replaced by neurological accounts. Rather than operating a problematic reduction (which would preserve the reality of the mental but nonetheless identify it with a physical brain state), eliminative materialism says simply that the mental does not exist. Daniel C. Dennett gets around the problem of reduction by proposing that human minds should be considered *intentional systems*: though from a properly scientific point of view, references to subjective states may in the end be eliminated (à la Churchland), folk-psychological descriptions still possess an explanatory power that helps us distinguish a human mind from physical and designed system, which do not have intentional states (states that “point to” things in the external world), and predict the behavior of intentional agents (humans, animals, etc.).

²⁸ David Chalmers articulates the mind-brain problem in the following terms: “...there is no deep philosophical mystery in the fact that [brains] can process information in complex ways, react to stimuli with sophisticated behavior, and even exhibit such complex capacities as learning, memory, and language. All this is impressive, but not metaphysically baffling. In contrast, the existence of conscious experience seems to be a new feature from this viewpoint. It is not something that one would have predicted from the other features alone” (Chalmers, 1996). See also: Frank Jackson, “Epiphenomenal Qualia,” *Philosophical Quarterly*, No. 127 (April 1982), pp. 127-136.

²⁹ A theory of mind known as *New Mysterianism* holds that the nature of the mind-body relation simply cannot be understood. See: Collin McGinn, “Can We Solve the Mind-Body Problem?” *Mind*, 98, no. 391 (July 1989), pp. 349-366; and, *The Mysterious Flame: Conscious Minds in a Material World*, New York, Basic Books, 1999.

whether a mind is made of something so arcane as an immaterial spirit or so concrete as computer circuitry is not of principal concern. Rather, the functionalist claims that whatever the substance in question may be, certain arrangements of that substance will produce mental properties. Jerry Fodor, one of the originators of functionalism, summarizes his position in the following terms:

...A philosophy of mind called functionalism that is neither dualist nor materialist has emerged from philosophical developments in artificial intelligence, computational theory, linguistics, cybernetics and psychology... Functionalism... recognizes the possibility that systems as diverse as human beings, calculating machines and disembodied spirits could all have mental states. In the functionalist view the psychology of a system depends not on the stuff it is made of (living cells, mental or spiritual energy) but on how the stuff is put together (Fodor, 2006, p. 82).

Functionalists are concerned with providing a description of the behavior of a mental system in virtue of the causal properties of whatever physical states happen to be realized within that system. A mental system realizing the discrete physical state S-1, for instance, should give rise to behavior A, regardless of the nature of the substance in which the state is realized. What matters, then, for the functionalist is not the hardware in which the mental state occurs, but rather the software that is being used to exploit the hardware. Fodor asks, “Why should the philosopher dismiss the possibility that silicon-based Martians have pains, assuming the silicon is properly organized? And why should the philosopher rule out the possibility of machines having beliefs, assuming that the machines are correctly programmed” (Fodor, 2006, p. 87)? Applied practically, functionalism is a philosophy that bears directly on scientists' efforts to create artificially intelligent computers and other so-called “spiritual” machines.³⁰ All talk among A.I.

³⁰ The reference here is to Ray Kurzweil's 1999 book *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence*. In this book and others (i.e., *The Singularity Is Near: When Human Beings Transcend Biology*, New York, Viking, 2005), Kurzweil discusses the possibilities for human evolution in

enthusiasts about machine self-awareness, cybernetics, and “consciousness uploading” relies explicitly on the functionalist account of the mind.³¹

Functionalism is a theory that does not worry so much about providing an explanation of the mental in terms of the physical, but rather bets that whatever the relation of the brain to the mind may be, properly construed hardware running on the right software will constitute a mental system. The *unmetaphysical* nature of functionalism is evident—the functionalist leaves the matter of debating the mind-brain relation to the metaphysician and deals with the practical problem of how to *make* a mind. The objection that haunts functionalism, however, is that the nature of the mental may pose an irreducibly metaphysical problem: while the functionalist attempts to give an account of the mind purely in terms of causal states producing behaviors (such as a pin prick realizing a mental state that causes the linguistic behavior of screaming “ouch”), one may always counter that this account fails to confront the subjective and conscious nature of experience. Computers produce behavior all the time in virtue of their programs, but only the most die-hard functionalist (or A.I. junkie) would go so far as to say computers have conscious experiences. Thus, philosophers such as John Searle have been able to dispute the claims of functionalism by arguing that having a mind in the human sense is not the same thing as simply running a program, for nothing about causal

an age where computers have exceeded human beings in intelligence and begun to design themselves. For a discussion of similarities between Houellebecq and Kurzweil, see Christopher Caldwell’s article “Beyond Human” in the October 23rd, 2005 edition of the *New York Times*.

³¹ Daniel Dinello describes the “techno-heaven” of A.I. and cybernetics enthusiasts in these terms: “You will be resurrected into posthuman immortality when you discard your body, digitize your mind, and download your identity into the artificial brain of a computer. Cyber-existing in virtual reality, you will live forever in a perfect simulation of divine bliss. This techno-heaven is envisioned by a cult of techno-priests... who profess a religious faith that the god Technology will eliminate the pain and suffering of humans by eliminating humans. These techno-utopians fervently believe that technological progress will lead to perfection for the posthuman, cyborg descendents of a flawed, inevitably extinct humanity” (Dinello, 2005, p. 1).

state S-1 producing behavior A indicates the existence of consciousness.³² In the end, whether functionalism is true will rest on future science's ability to demonstrate the existence of consciousness in machines that are able to realize mental states identical or at least similar to our own.

The advantage of functionalism is not that it resolves the quarrel between reductive and non-reductive materialism, but that it declares that quarrel to be of no particular importance to science. What is important for science is to study the human mind/brain the only way it can—by prodding the physical properties and mechanisms of the brain in order to determine how they produce mental states. It may of course be the case that this method of investigation will never be able to explain fully the nature of the mental. Indeed, no one can definitively rule out that such a thing as a soul exists, or that Descartes' intuition of an immaterial mental substance (whatever that may mean) was misled. Still, the functional theory of mind, however insulated it may be from the metaphysical conundrums that plague reductive and non-reductive theorists, remains the most useful to modern science. And, as we will see in the next section, it is functionalism that best describes Houellebecq's brand of materialism.

Houellebecquian Materialism: A Qualified Case?

³² Searle presents this argument in his well-known "Chinese room" metaphor. In the Chinese room, an English-speaker who does not understand Chinese is fed bits of Chinese pictograms and given instructions for how to combine them into meaningful words. The English-speaker does not know what the words mean, but instructions in a programming booklet allow him to assemble meaningful responses to the input he receives from outside the Chinese room. Searle's point is that in the case of A.I., machines are only following a program for combining symbols (a "syntax" for producing output). The machines do not actually know, and are not required to know, what the symbols mean. In the case of a human mind, however, syntax is overlain by semantics—meaning. The human being not only assembles proper responses to input but knows what the input and output *mean*. Functionalism, because it identifies having a mind with running a program, fails to account for the semantic, and not merely syntactic, nature of human mentality (Searle, 2006, pp. 145, 147).

Houellebecq does a very good job trying to hide his physicalist biases—even from himself. Yet, for a keen philosophical observer the flaws in the author’s thinking become visible. Houellebecq confronts materialism in much the same way that functionalism does: the mind-brain relation is a metaphysical problem, and science does well to avoid it. In Houellebecq’s case, however, the indifference toward metaphysics typical of the functionalist becomes a denial of “metaphysical” reality under the auspices of a doctrinaire form of positivism. That is, while functionalism will attempt to describe the nature of the mental without reference to its hardware, Houellebecq tries to identify this indifference toward the physical nature of the mind with a denial of materialism *tout court*. As we will see, this effort is not particularly convincing, and little reason exists to think that Houellebecq is anything other than a materialist.

The confusion begins with Houellebecq’s claim to Bernard-Henri Lévy in *Ennemis publics* that “si je suis foncièrement athée, j’en suis pas pour autant matérialiste” (Houellebecq, 2008, p. 149). Taken at face value, Houellebecq’s statement means none other than the following: Houellebecq believes in immaterial realities but not in God. Similar to non-theistic Theravada Buddhism in this respect, an "atheist dualism" such as what Houellebecq appears to be describing might claim that deity does not play a necessary causal role in the existence of spirit, soul, etc.³³ But this, evidently, is not what Houellebecq is saying (as anyone familiar with the author's theological dispositions would be able to guess). In fact, Houellebecq says the very opposite later on:

Une religion sans Dieu est peut-être possible... Mais rien de tout cela ne me paraît envisageable sans une croyance à la vie éternelle; cette croyance qui constitue, pour toutes les religions monothéistes, un fantastique *produit d’appel*... (Houellebecq, 2008, p. 177)

³³ Theravada Buddhism, the Buddhism of Southeast Asia, is commonly referred to as a non-theistic religion because it does not possess a Godhead.

Here Houellebecq suggests that the existence of God *is* causally related to the existence of spirit, while a moment ago he said he was an atheist but not a materialist. With the exception of historical materialism, the word *materialism* has always been taken, in the modern sense, to connote the denial of immaterial realities like souls, spirits, ghosts, gods—spooky stuff, we might say. So with God and spirit out of the picture, what spooky stuff could Houellebecq be talking about? How is the author's skepticism toward the otherworldly any different from that of the average materialist, be he or she of the reductive or non-reductive stripe?

The perplexity surrounding Houellebecq's stance on materialism is only resolvable if we place the author's views within the context of his allegiance to a form of positivism. Houellebecq's refusal of the materialist label is a product not of some clandestine belief in the otherworldly, but rather stems from an inexplicable—not to mention unjustifiable—willingness to *identify the empirically unverifiable with the immaterial*. A distinguishing characteristic of positivism, be it the positivism of Auguste Comte or the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle,³⁴ is its attempt to eliminate metaphysical discourse from philosophy by appealing to scientific method as the unique arbiter of truth. As Comte claimed in his doctrine of the Three Stages, the “metaphysical stage” of classical and Enlightenment Europe would give way to a period of scientific,

³⁴ The Vienna Circle was a group of early twentieth-century philosophers that included Moritz Schlick, Hans Hahn, Philipp Frank, Otto Neurath, and Rudolph Carnap, among others. The group was most famous for its radical dismissal of metaphysics and its intransigent empiricism. Broadly speaking, the Vienna Circle promoted a doctrine of *logical positivism*, according to which phenomena that could not be verified scientifically were cognitively meaningless. This *verificationism* appeared to treat empirically unverifiable phenomena, such as the mind-brain relation, as if they did not exist. As a result, logical positivism is often associated with scientism.

“positive” epistemology, while previous ways of knowing would decline.³⁵ In the end, truly meaningful propositions about the world would be verifiable by some sort of empirical test. Otherwise, they were both scientifically and cognitively meaningless.

Unsurprisingly, the essential claims of both reductive and non-reductive forms of mind-body materialism—that the brain is identical with the mind and that the brain gives rise to the mind, respectively—are two such propositions. Thus we find Houellebecq writing,

...Jamais on ne cherche à « composer la machine »; jamais on n’en vient à se poser la question de savoir ce qu’il y a *derrière* les entités physiques que l’on a définies, que l’on peut mesurer; s’il s’agit de matière, ou d’esprit, ou d’un autre agrégat mental qu’il pourrait prendre fantaisie à l’homme d’imaginer. On prend congé, en somme, et à jamais, des *questions métaphysiques* (Houellebecq, 2008, p. 150).

In principle, there is nothing wrong with betting against science in its attempts to grasp the full nature of reality. This certainly seems to be the tack that the non-reductive theorists take in their arguments against mind-brain reduction, and their work has been influential among contemporary philosophers. But for Houellebecq to move from a purely procedural dilemma—the impossibility of empirical verification—to rejecting materialism as a false doctrine is totally unwarranted. Houellebecq would spare his readers much confusion if he used the term “materialism” in a clearer sense. First of all,

³⁵ The law of the three stages formed the basis of Comte’s sociological theory. The theological stage was that of medieval Christianity, in which knowledge about the world was understood to proceed from an unquestionable divine source. To “know” in effect meant to know that God knew, and to accept that authority as the condition for knowing. In the second, metaphysical stage, the theological episteme was replaced by human reason. During this period, which began with the Renaissance and culminated in the Enlightenment, epistemological priority shifted to humanity’s ability to sift metaphysical reality in order to uncover the hidden truths of the world. The scientific method emerged during this period and began to dispute the priority of metaphysical knowledge by insisting on empirical means of verification, and as the scientific method began to outstrip metaphysics, Western civilization entered the positive stage of knowledge. In this period, which Comte supposed was his own, knowing was equivalent with empirical verification, whereas traditionally metaphysical questions, such as that of the relation of body to mind, were ignored as uninteresting or simply meaningless.

non-reductive and reductive materialism are *both* materialisms. The fact that non-reductive theorists cannot say what the mental is apart from the physical does not mean that the mental does not depend on material processes for its existence. For these theorists, the mind might not be physical in the strict sense, but it is still a product of the physical brain. Secondly, granted that non-reductive materialism is a materialism, not being a materialist means *absolutely* that one must be a dualist of some sort: for the brain either is/gives rise to the mind or it does not. Given that Houellebecq does not believe in souls, in this respect we have no choice but to label him a materialist. Thirdly, and most importantly, “*metaphysical*” is a term that describes neither the material nor the immaterial. Why I perceive red as red and not in some other way is a metaphysical question, but no one doubts that red has a physical description. *Material* and *immaterial* are ontological predicates; *metaphysical* is an epistemological predicate. I can know about physical processes metaphysically, positivistically, or however, but the form of knowing does not render the verdict on the reality of the physical process in question.

When Houellebecq claims that he is not a materialist, it seems that he does not quite know what the word *materialism* means. Let us consider, moreover, the scorn with which the author treats the notion of the divine:

Un *positiviste endurci* est un adversaire pénible; autant et plus déplaisant, à sa manière, qu’un *matérialiste endurci*. Il n’affichera jamais, contrairement à ce dernier, d’opposition frontale. Viennois subtils. Un souffle divin « ruah », dira notre positiviste logique, bien sûr bien sûr, convenons de le noter « ^R », pouvez-vous mettre sur pied un dispositif expérimental? comment parviendrez-vous à le mettre en évidence ? L’entité, la mise en équation, la preuve. Et la psychanalyse (Popper vs Freud)? Non réfutable, donc n’appartenant pas au savoir scientifique. *Ite missa est*, pour le positiviste... (2008, p. 154, my emphasis)

Of course, of course—how easily the positivist dismisses this silly talk of "divine breath." And yet, curiously enough, it is precisely positivism that Houellebecq recruits in his defense of the immaterial! We should be clear: Houellebecq is a materialist with a proclivity toward functionalism. When he writes, "...s'il s'agit de matière, ou d'esprit, ou d'un autre agrégat mental qu'il pourrait prendre fantaisie à l'homme d'imaginer..." one recalls Fodor's claim above that "functionalism... recognizes the possibility that systems as diverse as human beings, calculating machines and disembodied spirits could all have mental states. In the functionalist view the psychology of a system depends not on the stuff it is made of (living cells, mental or spiritual energy) but on how the stuff is put together." Subsequent claims such as "Et une conscience se manifesterait aussi, dès qu'elles auront atteint un certain stade de développement, chez les machines, ces entités formées de circuits, créées par l'homme..." (Houellebecq, 2008, p. 152) only serve to confirm the verdict. Michel Houellebecq is about as dualist as Bertrand Russell was a Christian.³⁶

Quantum Uncertainties

We must keep in mind, however, that Houellebecq is not principally a philosopher. I have pointed out above the irregularities of Houellebecq's position and the points at which his efforts to sidestep the charge of materialism fall flat. I have also attempted to place his philosophy of mind within the context of twentieth-century analytic philosophy and more specifically non-reductive materialist and functionalist interpretations of the mind-brain relation. Ultimately, however, little purpose is served in

³⁶ The reference here is to Bertrand Russell's famous essay *Why I Am Not a Christian* (in *Why I Am Not a Christian, and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1957).

making lengthy accusations against the author on account of his amateur philosophizing: for, after all, Houellebecq is a novelist, not a metaphysician, and though his treatments of materialism, the mind-body problem, metaphysics, and positivism may not be philosophically noteworthy or even sound, they are nonetheless of great significance within the context of his fiction.

In his *Lettre à Lakis Proguidis*, Houellebecq describes the prevailing worldview of his time as “une ontologie matérialiste” grounded in a concept of “déterminisme local” (Houellebecq, 2009, p. 152). In such a perspective, an irreducibly material reality is describable in terms of rigidly mechanistic laws, which, if ascertained and applied with rigor, can be used to create an exhaustive portrait of the universe. Elsewhere, Houellebecq contrasts this classic Newtonian view with his faith in a kind of *quantum materialism*—essentially, the author’s conviction that the discoveries of quantum physics and in particular the Copenhagen interpretation,³⁷ which suggests that physical reality has only a probabilistic, virtual existence, point in the direction of an altogether new ontology, which replaces the unbending, atomistic determinism of the Newtonian model. In many respects, Houellebecq’s rejection of the materialist name tag stems as much from his quantum materialism as it does from his positivism—so long, that is, as we understand his definition of materialism to be bound up with an exclusively classical mechanics. Though we may wonder to what degree a quantum materialism and a

³⁷ The Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics holds that no clear dividing line exists between the observer and what is being observed. Wolf writes, “According to the [Copenhagen School], there is no reality until that reality is perceived. Our perceptions of reality will, consequently, appear somewhat contradictory, dualistic, and paradoxical. The instantaneous experience of the reality of Now will not appear paradoxical at all. It is only when we observers attempt to construct a history of our perceptions that reality seems paradoxical. . . . Both the wave and particle descriptions of nature are remnants of our desire for continuity. They represent our best attempts to understand physical reality in terms of pictures, mechanical constructs of thought based upon continuity. When we observe anything on an atomic scale, we disrupt that continuity” (Wolf, 1989, pp. 128-129).

classical materialism are really different in principle (since neither position makes room for the spiritual dimension that Houellebecq finds lacking in contemporary Western culture), in *Les particules élémentaires* Houellebecq presents the transition from a classical Newtonian to a quantum description of physical reality as no less than a promise of salvation—a kind of spiritualized form of the “paradigm shift” that Thomas Kuhn discusses in his most famous work. As readers will remember, the novel’s narrator claims near book’s end that Djerzinski’s discoveries in genetics rely at base on certain “risky interpretations” of the principles of quantum physics (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 377). What this means, if anything, from a scientific point of view is unclear, but in fictional guise, Houellebecq’s discussion of quantum physics and its classical forebear furnish the author with the means of addressing the dangers and downfalls of contemporary materialism, as well as humanity’s collective hopes for deliverance under the auspices of an altogether new understanding of reality.

Les particules élémentaires is the story of the decline of a civilization—Western civilization—told from the perspective of two brothers, Bruno and Michel, whose lives collapse as they enter middle age. Bruno’s addiction to sex forces him to abandon his lover Christiane when she is paralyzed from the waist down. Christiane commits suicide, and a despondent, guilt-ridden Bruno commits himself to a mental institution. Michel, on the other hand, is so chronically depressed, and so disgusted with humanity, that he is unable even to experience sexual pleasure. Instead, bringing to bear his training as a biophysicist, Michel engineers a plan to replace humanity with a race of genetically engineered clones and kills himself once his work is complete. Both Bruno and Michel suffer under the ideological and epistemic weight of the *metaphysics of materialism*, a

worldview which, "incompatible avec l'humanisme... a donné naissance à une 'culture de la jouissance,' basée sur l'apologie du désir et de la libération sexuelle, qui ont pour corollaire l'individualisme, le consumérisme et le mercantilisme" (Dahan-Gaida, 2003, p. 95). Antecedent to this inimical development in Western consciousness is a supposed golden age of piety, which Houellebecq depicts in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* through the mouthpiece of the narrator's priest friend Buvet:

Au siècle de Louis XIV, où l'appétit de vivre était grand, la culture officielle mettait l'accent sur la négation des plaisirs et de la chair ; rappelait avec insistance que la vie mondaine n'offre que des joies imparfaites, que la seule vraie source de félicité est en Dieu. Un tel discours... ne serait plus toléré aujourd'hui. Nous avons besoin d'aventure et d'érotisme, car nous avons besoin de nous entendre répéter que la vie est merveilleuse et excitante ; et c'est bien entendu que nous en doutons un peu (Houellebecq, 1994, p. 37).

Houellebecq formulates the cultural consequences of materialism with superlative grimness: the death of God, the decline of religion, and loss of faith in spirit and immortality have created a hedonistic Western culture in which moral concerns have been abandoned, and where cults of youth and sexual freedom, fear of death and aging, and social alienation under the inhumanity of the liberal economic regime have made existence nearly insufferable for the majority of Westerners. All of Houellebecq's characters are victims in one respect or another of this view of reality and humanity's ultimate purpose in the universe. Confronted with the selfish, hedonistic, and "atomized"³⁸ society that has accompanied the historical rise of materialism, Houellebecq thus imagines a paradigm shift in our understanding of the physical world, by recourse to a redefinition of that very material that seemed to augur separation, alienation, and a definitive end of the sacred in Western consciousness.

³⁸ *Atomized* is the title of the British version of *Les particules élémentaires*.

The ostensible remedy to human (and specifically Western) misery that the reader encounters in *Les particules élémentaires* is the creation of a race of asexual and immortal clones, which by novel's end has come to replace a rapidly diminishing humanity (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 385). Free from the egoism and loneliness that plagued the previous race of men, the clones pay homage to their human forebears for having envisioned the possibility of their own replacement; they even go so far as to esteem themselves, albeit somewhat facetiously, as the gods that had so captivated the imagination and passion of the former race:

Ayant rompu le lien filial qui nous rattachait à l'humanité, nous vivons. À l'estimation des hommes, nous vivons heureux ; il est vrai que nous avons su dépasser les puissances, insurmontables pour eux, de l'égoïsme, de la cruauté et de la colère ; nous vivons de toute façon une vie différente. La science et l'art existent toujours dans notre société; mais la poursuite du Vrai et du Beau, moins stimulée de la vanité individuelle, a de fait acquis un caractère moins urgent. Aux humains de l'ancienne race, notre monde fait l'effet d'un paradis. Il nous arrive d'ailleurs parfois de nous qualifier nous-mêmes—sur un mode, il est vrai, légèrement humoristique—de ce nom de 'dieux' qui les avait tant fait rêver (Houellebecq, 1998a, pp. 393-394).

The neo-humans of *Les particules élémentaires* are a species of androgynous humanoids for whom the increased sensitivity of the erogenous zones permits engagement in sexual acts significantly more pleasurable than those that we, poor humans, are limited to (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 389). With fear of death putatively eliminated, and along with it the reproductive instinct that had so complicated previous human relationships, the clones seem to have a splendid time of it, and the reader is left to wonder if there is not some wisdom in Houellebecq's vision after all.

Houellebecq's suggestion that we attempt to prevent the collapse of civilization by recourse to genetic engineering has naturally made him vulnerable to criticism.

Certain writers have accused Houellebecq of promoting eugenics,³⁹ and the author has made clear in public comments that, much in line with the arguments of Hubczejak near the end of *Les particules élémentaires*, humanity's next step forward “ne sera pas mentale, mais génétique” (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 392).⁴⁰ Eugenics comes in two distinct and morally discernable forms—the malevolent sort, the kind of racial engineering the Nazis used; and the benevolent sort, which doctors and scientists may one day prevail upon to eliminate congenital deformities and propensities to certain forms of disease in the unborn—and, needless to say, it is only this second form for which Houellebecq offers an apology in *Les particules élémentaires*. Writing after the fall of communism, Houellebecq has difficulty imagining we can change human nature by a *program of re-education*; some more elemental alteration is evidently in order. Unfortunately, the alteration Houellebecq suggests—the creation of a race of genetically modified clones—relies on science that is just as dubious as the theories of “human malleability” typical of high Stalinism. Specifically, the proposition that quantum physics might play a key role in such a transformation fails to live up to any conceivable scientific rigor, and leaves the reader grasping for an intelligible interpretation of the text's finale.

From a philosophical point of view, quantum theory is interesting because it appears to radically re-orient the relationship of the mind with the external world. The

³⁹ “Le roman de Houellebecq peut ainsi se réclamer de la théorie des quanta pour composer une ode au déterminisme biologique, ou prétendre lutter contre le néo-libéralisme en défendant mordicus l'idée qu'il faut calibrer l'humanité par la génétique pour aboutir à un produit parfait. Tout cela est normal et il faudrait vraiment être à la solde de la pensée unique pour y trouver à redire” (Nicolas Bourriaud, et al., 1998).

⁴⁰ When asked by *Lire* whether he supported eugenics, Houellebecq answered, “Oui, dans le sens positif. Il est clair qu'il est immoral d'empêcher quelqu'un de se reproduire quel que soit son état. Mais il est très moral de prendre un œuf constitué et de lui ôter les défauts génétiques qui risquent de lui faire perdre la vie. Il y a dans l'eugénisme le pire et le meilleur. Le pire, ce sont les nazis qui, parce qu'ils n'arrivaient pas à intervenir sur le code génétique, ont tué. Le meilleur, c'est le Téléthon qui essaye de guérir ceux qui sont atteints d'un gène néfaste” (Houellebecq, 1998b).

human mind organizes experience in accordance with fundamental intuitions of space, time, and linear causality. Quantum wave functions, however—the “stuff” of quantum physics—exist in a dimension beyond what experience can capture. Philosopher Fred Alan Wolf describes the quantum universe as follows:

This third [quantum] reality is a bridge between the world of the mind and the world of matter. Having attributes, of both, it is a paradoxical and magical reality. In it, causality is strictly behaved. In other words, the laws of cause and effect manifest. The only problem is that it isn't objects that are following those laws (at least, not the ordinary kinds of objects we usually refer to), but ghosts! And these ghosts are downright paradoxical, able to appear in two or more places, even an infinite number of places, at the same time. When these ghosts are used to describe matter, they closely resemble waves. And that is why they were first called “matter waves.” In modern usage, they are called “quantum wave functions (Wolf, 1989, pp. 184-186).

The basic posits of quantum theory are two-fold. On the one hand, we cannot observe an electron wave/particle without interfering with it (and thus changing its state): the better we can see the electron (particle) in the microscope, the less we are able to say where it (the propagating wave) is going; yet, the better we can see where it is going, the less able we are to say where it is. This observational limitation is known as Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, and it has to do with the fact that the tool we use to look at electrons—light, which mediates our observation of objects—does things to the wave function that alter its state. Just what exactly is our observation doing? According to the Copenhagen interpretation, our observation is bringing the “physical” electron into existence. Quantum wave-functions are virtual entities, which, cashed out in terms we can make sense of, exist as a series of probabilities of an electron's location. When we look at the wave function, it collapses and the electron appears at a specific location. When we are not looking, the wave reemerges and begins to propagate through space as a

virtual entity. It is important to keep in mind that terms like *virtual* are more metaphorical than anything else. Human consciousness does not literally call the world into being; what is happening is rather that the world is appearing to us in a way determined by internal intuitions that do not represent the external world as it really is (that is, as it is “quantumly”). To experience the world as we do is to experience electrons as waves collapsing into particles. But what such objects (or waves, or functions, etc.) do on their own time is their business, and our access to those activities is purely mathematical.

In some respects, the quantum theorists confirm scientifically what philosophers such as Kant already knew: that the external world is not just “given” to the senses, but that the mind has a way of representing it that may not do justice to “actual” (quantum) states of affairs.⁴¹ More importantly, quantum physics tells us that the seeming weirdness of quantum phenomena only manifests at the level of elementary particles.⁴² Theoretically, the wave functions of the electrons in the moon could suddenly cause the satellite to reorganize itself as a hulking mass of kitchen appliances. Such an occurrence is, in other words, a *quantum possibility*. But of course such things never happen, and never could happen, for it would take an eternity for the wave functions of such large objects to propagate to the point where even the most microscopic changes in the physical structure of the moon could take place. Classical mechanics, though technically

⁴¹ In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argued that our intuitions of space and time, rather than being products of experience, are necessary preconditions for our ability to have experiences in the first place. Kant was naturally unaware of the nature of quantum reality.

⁴² “Il est clair que la physique quantique n’a jamais été démentie par l’expérience à l’échelle *microscopique* ; or, l’utiliser pour modéliser des interactions neuronales, voire même biochimiques, c’est-à-dire à une échelle de grandeur *macroscopique*, conduit justement à des problèmes non-négligeables. En d’autres termes, la pertinence d’une telle utilisation ne fait pas consensus parmi les scientifiques” (Atallah, 2006, pp. 17-18).

mistaken in light of quantum theory, therefore allows us to predict macro-physical events as if they were ruled by rigidly deterministic laws.

For a non-specialist with an education in computer science, Houellebecq appears to have extraordinary knowledge of modern physics. Yet at times, the author is eager to infer a causal link between the quantum uncertainty associated with the behavior of electrons, and chemical and electrical events in macro-physical systems such as the human brain. While Djerzinski may claim, for instance, that “le grand nombre de neurones fait cependant, par annulation statistique des différences élémentaires, que le comportement humain est... aussi rigoureusement déterminé que celui de tout autre système naturel” (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 117), at the next moment he suggests that quantum events in the brain—specifically, “une onde de cohérence nouvelle [qui] surgit et se propage à l’intérieur du cerveau” (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 77)—may give rise to acts of free will. Houellebecq is also intrigued by the quantum wave function itself—essentially, the notion that “material” reality may in fact be described as an infinity of ever-propagating, interpenetrating waves, which taken together weave all the particles of the universe into an inseparable whole (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 251). The narrator-clone writes in summary of Djerzinski’s work,

Il est même vraisemblable... que Comte, placé dans la situation intellectuelle qui fut celle de Niels Bohr entre 1924 et 1927, aurait maintenu son attitude de positivisme intransigeant, et se serait rallié à l’interprétation de Copenhague. Toutefois, l’insistance du philosophe français sur la réalité des états sociaux par rapport à la fiction des existences individuelles, son intérêt constamment renouvelé pour les processus historiques et les courants de conscience, son sentimentalisme exacerbé surtout laissent penser qu’il n’aurait peut-être pas été hostile à un projet de refonte ontologique... le remplacement d’une ontologie d’objets par une ontologie d’états. Seule une ontologie d’états, en effet, était en mesure de restaurer la possibilité pratique des relations humaines. Dans une ontologie d’états les particules étaient indiscernables, et on devait se

limiter à les qualifier par le biais d'un observable *nombre*. Les seules entités susceptibles d'être réidentifiées et nommées dans une telle ontologie étaient les fonctions d'onde, et par leur intermédiaire les vecteurs d'état—d'où la possibilité analogique de redonner un sens à la fraternité, la sympathie et l'amour (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 372).

The suggestion that the quantum behavior of elementary particles could have anything to do with fraternity, sympathy, and love is not only confusing but also inaccurate. Physical reality may be describable in terms of wave functions, but nothing about this description (which is wholly mathematical, moreover) can be expected to heal the wounds of physical separation that afflict the characters of *Les particules élémentaires*. As Houellebecq writes of Bruno and Christiane, “Malgré le retour alternatif des nuits, une conscience individuelle persisterait jusqu'à la fin dans leurs chairs séparées” (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 249). What, exactly, is the application of quantum wave theory to human relationships supposed to be, or even mean, when we cannot identify a literal or physical link between the two domains?

Here it is important to distinguish between Houellebecq's use of the quantum wave as an aesthetic metaphor for the social organization of his post-human utopia, and the actual implementation of quantum principles in the creation of the novel's race of clones. In the second instance, Houellebecq never specifically mentions the science that goes into the elaboration of the neo-humans' genetic code. We read for instance,

Hubczejak note avec justesse que le plus grand mérite de Djerzinski n'est pas d'avoir su dépasser le concept de liberté individuelle... mais d'avoir su, par le biais *d'interprétations il est vrai un peu hasardeuses* des postulats de la mécanique quantique, restaurer les conditions de possibilité de l'amour (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 377, my italics).

Indeed, how could quantum mechanics, which describes the behavior of subatomic particles, *literally* be brought to bear on the fabrication of a new human species, much

less make love possible? We read earlier on that “d’une manière ou d’une autre, encore impossible à élucider, le niveau quantique devait intervenir directement dans les phénomènes biologiques” (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 156), but the evidence backing up this assertion is never offered. If Houellebecq is insisting on an actual physical link between the behavior of the quantum wave function and the “practical possibility of human relationships,” we have sufficient reason to label his post-human utopia an expression of pseudo-scientific nonsense and his own wishful thinking. (Indeed, at least one researcher has been quick to condemn the finale of *Les particules élémentaires* as both “clownish” and “absurd” (van Wesemael, 2005b, p. 186).) However, if we regard the novel’s treatment of quantum physics as a metaphor for improved human relations, then Houellebecq’s rapprochement between the two terms is in fact quite effective, if not moving.

Let us consider, for example, Djerzinski’s reaction to the priest’s marriage rite during Bruno and Anne’s wedding. Struck by the notion of “two bodies becoming one” in the sacrament of holy matrimony, Djerzinski explains,

“J’ai été très intéressé par ce que vous disiez tout à l’heure...” L’homme de Dieu sourit avec urbanité. Il enchaîna alors sur les expériences d’Aspect et le paradoxe EPR: lorsque deux particules ont été réunies, elles forment dès lors un tout inséparable, “ça me paraît tout à fait en rapport avec cette histoire d’une seule chair.” Le sourire du pasteur se crispa légèrement. “Je veux dire, poursuivant Michel en s’animant, sur le plan ontologique, on peut leur associer un vecteur d’état unique dans un espace Hilbert.” (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 215).

Here Djerzinski produces a compelling metaphorical connection between the linking of human lives, as in marriage, and the discovery that electrons with the same vector in a Hilbert space (as opposed to classical, linear space) will act instantaneously on each other

even over immense distances (the principle of non-separability).⁴³ The comparison is a stretch at best, and certainly Houellebecq intends the exchange between scientist and priest to be humorous. Nonetheless, we should not ignore the religious dimension of Djerzinski's remarks. Later on, after Djerzinski has been reunited with Annabelle, he has the following dream:

...Il vit l'agrégat mental de l'espace, et son contraire. Il vit le conflit mental qui structurait l'espace, et sa disparition. Il vit l'espace comme une ligne très fine qui séparait deux sphères. Dans la première sphère était l'être, et la séparation; dans la seconde sphère était le non-être, et la disparition individuelle. Calmement, sans hésiter, il se retourna et se dirigea vers la seconde sphère (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 293).

The first sphere is the physical, classically determined world, where human bodies, minds, feelings, etc., are separated by the immutable barriers of space, time, and embodiment. The second sphere is the quantum dimension: here, where all is woven together in an infinitely interpenetrating universe of quantum wave functions, the perceived physical separation of one human being from another is revealed to be an illusion. In the quantum sphere we encounter a powerful metaphor for the so-called “oneness with everything” that underlies a great deal of religious and mystical discourse,⁴⁴ as well as a symbolic portrayal of human relations liberated from physical and emotional alienation. And it is precisely this vision that, as the text confirms, motivates Djerzinski's work in genetics. By sharing the same genetic code, his clones have achieved at least in some figurative sense the non-separability of united electrons.

⁴³ According to the principle of non-separability, two particles can, under certain conditions, exercise a non-local effect upon each other. That is, the action of each particle will affect the outcome of the other regardless of the distance between them.

⁴⁴ In Hinduism, for example, one can speak of two “Atmans” (or universal spirits): the lower-case atman as a fragment of the universal spirit within a person, and an uppercase Atman as the universal spirit writ large, so to speak. When a person is released from the wheel of rebirth (by realizing the identity of the personal and universal principle of Atman), his or her little atman merges with big Atman as a drop of water becomes part of the Ocean. In other words, the lowercase atman ceases to exist.

Furthermore, in doing away with sexual reproduction, the sexual alienation that plagued the humans of the “age of materialism” has yielded to free love, pleasure liberated from jealousy and fear of rejection, and infinite belonging to and in the bodies of others. If we can accept this vision for what it is—an idealistic, often satirical, yet heartfelt fantasy about the future of human relations—and forgive the questionable science that supports it, Houellebecq’s quantum future, far from coming across as absurd, should strike us as a significant and thought-provoking counterpoint to the imperfect and imperfectable social relations of both our time and, indeed, our species.

What remains to be addressed, however, is whether such a vision, quantum physics and all, truly augurs the transition from a materialist to a post-materialist age. In both *Les particules élémentaires* and his non-fiction writing, Houellebecq identifies materialism writ large with the description of reality issuing from classical, Newtonian mechanics—what we might think of as the materialism of a high school chemistry textbook, with electron orbs rotating around a red and blue clump of protons and neutrons. In Houellebecq’s view, this model of a solid, deterministic universe stands in stark contrast to the “immaterial” reality of the quantum wave function. In the *Lettre à Lakis Proguidis*, the author even goes so far as to claim that quantum physics constitutes a refutation of materialism:

Le XXe siècle restera—aussi—cette époque paradoxale où les physiciens ont réfuté le matérialisme, renoncé au déterminisme local, abandonné en somme totalement cette ontologie d’objets et de propriétés qui dans le même temps se répandit dans le grand public comme constitutive d’une vision scientifique du monde (Houellebecq, 2009, p. 152).

We find virtually the same kind of commentary in *Les particules élémentaires*:

Contrairement au matérialisme qu’il avait remplacé, le positivisme pouvait... être fondateur d’un nouvel humanisme, et ceci, en réalité, pour

la première fois (car le matérialisme était au fond incompatible avec l'humanisme, et devait finir par le détruire). Il n'empêche que le matérialisme avait eu son importance historique: il fallait franchir une première barrière, qui était Dieu; des hommes l'avaient franchie, et s'étaient trouvés plongés dans la détresse et dans le doute. Mais une deuxième barrière avait été franchie, aujourd'hui; et ceci s'était produit à Copenhague. Ils n'avaient plus besoin de Dieu, ni d'une réalité sous-jacente (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 373).

In both of these passages, Houellebecq demonstrates a curious propensity to conflate matter (what we generally think of as solids, liquids, and gases) with the broader notion of the material, which includes all that exists in the observable universe. The quantum wave function may not be material in the macroscopic sense—that is, in the way that a table is material—but to say that it is not material in the broad sense is simply false. If anything of interest to the non-specialist can be taken away from quantum mechanics, it is that the ultimate nature of the physical universe is stunningly mysterious. We should remember that much of the “stuff” of the universe is in fact energy: energy is not material in the strict sense, but no one would say it is not physical.

Without an explicit appeal to truly immaterial reality (the universe of spirit, soul, deity, etc.) it is difficult to see how Houellebecq's “quantum option” really represents an escape from materialism. Wave functions are not souls. The fact that my existence is ultimately describable in quantum rather than classical mechanical terms changes nothing about my eventual confrontation with mortality. Quantum mechanics may provide a compelling metaphor for the nature of social bonds, but its actual physical significance is limited to the activities of subatomic particles. For the clones in *Les particules élémentaires* reality remains non-dual. Death remains death, despite a few propitious changes in the human genetic code and the pseudo-immortality of serial cloning. The

utopian future of *Les particules élémentaires* may make materialism more bearable, but in no way does it exceed it.

Although Houellebecq identifies materialism as the principle pathology of Western modernity, we have seen that his attempts to confront and move beyond it rely on scientific and philosophical premises that are fundamentally non-dual. The metaphysical dilemma of the mind-body relation does not necessarily indicate that the ultimate nature of the mind is non-physical. Rather, it only suggests that elucidating that relation is perhaps beyond the range of human conceptual abilities. Similarly, nothing about the imponderable nature of the quantum wave function points to the existence of immaterial realities like soul and spirit. Quantum wave functions may not be material in the sense of everyday experience, but they are evidently part of the physical world. For all the urgency with which he addresses the existential burdens of materialism, Houellebecq remains rooted in a broadly physicalist conception of the universe. Without an appeal to a robustly religious, dualistic understanding of human ontology and destiny, what fictional scenarios the author entertains as solutions to materialist angst in reality do no more than accommodate humanity's mortal nature. Such solutions are, in other words, incomplete, and it remains to be seen if Houellebecq will ever truly confront the existential dilemmas of materialism head-on.

Materialism is the key experimental condition of Houellebecq's creative work. Having evacuated all meaningful reference to transcendence from his fictional universe, the author shows us a world whose overarching pathos is an obsessive awareness of death, decline, and physical destruction. Crafted in realist tenor and supported by an impressive degree of ideological conviction, Houellebecq's novels assail their readers

with a sensation of “dangerous credibility” (Houellebecq, 2009, p. 294, my translation). And yet, despite the earnestness with which Houellebecq paints his bleak modernity, we must ask to what degree his vision of a materialistic and post-religious West is accurate. In the preceding pages, I have described the philosophical moorings of the materialistic worldview and the ways in which Houellebecq’s attempts to overcome it fall short. In the next chapter, I will question the degree to which the author’s vision of contemporary European society is realistic. As we will see, far fewer Westerners, and even supposedly secular Europeans, are as materialistic as we might conclude from a reading of Houellebecq’s work. Chapter three addresses Houellebecq’s claims about materialist culture in light of one of the most contentious issues in contemporary sociology of religion—the secularization debate.

CHAPTER III:

MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ AND RELIGIOUS DECLINE IN EUROPE

A Realistic Portrayal of European Religiosity?

L'agnosticisme de principe de la République française devait faciliter le triomphe hypocrite, progressif, et même légèrement sournois, de l'anthropologie matérialiste. Jamais ouvertement évoqués, les problèmes de valeur de la vie humaine continuèrent pas moins à faire leur chemin dans les esprits ; on peut sans nul doute affirmer qu'ils contribuèrent pour une part, au cours des ultimes décennies de la civilisation occidentale, à l'établissement d'un climat général dépressif, voire masochiste (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 90).

History teaches that religion is always in a state of change. No one would have predicted in 33 A.D. that the crucifixion of a Jew named Jesus of Nazareth would give rise to a religion that was to conquer the Roman Empire well before the barbarian hordes arrived. Still less would anyone have foretold the burgeoning Christian fundamentalism of the late-twentieth century, a time when many intellectuals thought that religion was in permanent decline.⁴⁵ History also teaches that religion cannot simply disappear, any more than it can be eradicated. The great Soviet experiment in atheism never managed to stifle the Russian Orthodox Church, nor have scientific discoveries concerning the origins of life, the workings of the brain, or the deterministic nature of most physical processes convinced significant numbers of people to abandon belief in God, gods, or their own free will.⁴⁶ Religion, whatever its merits, appears to be a permanent feature of the human landscape; it is also a phenomenon subject to a stunning degree of variety and change. The proliferation of Protestant sects in the United States is just one example among many

⁴⁵ Another relevant example is the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

⁴⁶ For an authoritative discussion of the Soviet attempt to eradicate religion, see: Paul Froese, *The Plot to Kill God*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2008.

of religion's ability to innovate.⁴⁷ Indeed, the sheer diversity of spiritual options in societies where religion is allowed free reign has led many contemporary scholars to speak of a veritable *religious market*, in which competing creeds and practices vie for members, much as different businesses in the same sector struggle to offer those products most likely to attract a majority of customers. When we consider the variety of contemporary religious expression, from Christian and Muslim fundamentalism to the spread of Christianity in the Third World and the importation of Buddhism to the West—not to mention institutions and cultures of transition, such as prisons and developing countries, where upheaval and uncertainty provide fertile ground for organized religion and spirituality—religion appears as inexorable as the motion of the heavenly bodies.

Not so for Michel Houellebecq. As I have suggested in previous pages, the author presents a West in which religion is being crushed by the weight of scientific modernity. Dualism has yielded to materialism, and materialism has created an environment in which human beings are no longer able to find meaningful responses to existential questions about death, eternity, and ultimate meaning. Religion in Houellebecq's fiction is a feeble entity, always in danger of being vanquished by the vicissitudes of history:

Dans des pays comme l'Espagne, la Pologne, l'Irlande, une foi catholique profonde, unanime, massive structurait la vie sociale et l'ensemble des comportements depuis des siècles, elle déterminait la morale comme les relations familiales, conditionnait l'ensemble des productions culturelles et artistiques, des hiérarchies sociales, des conventions, des règles de vie. En l'espace de quelques années, en moins d'une génération, en un temps incroyablement bref, tout cela avait disparu, s'était évaporé dans le néant. Dans ces pays aujourd'hui plus personne ne croyait en Dieu, n'en tenait le moindre compte, ne se souvenait même d'avoir cru; et cela s'était fait sans difficulté, sans conflit, sans violence ni protestation d'aucune sorte, sans même une discussion véritable, aussi aisément qu'un objet lourd, un temps maintenu par une entrave extérieure, revient dès qu'on le lâche à sa

⁴⁷ See Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers UP, 1992.

position d'équilibre. Les croyances spirituelles humaines étaient peut-être loin d'être ce bloc massif, solide, irréfutable qu'on se représente habituellement; elles étaient peut-être au contraire ce qu'il y avait en l'homme de plus fugace, de plus fragile, de plus prompt à naître ou à mourir (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 347).

In the post-religious civilization described above, capitalism prospers, since only it appears capable of furnishing those distractions—both carnal and proprietary—than can divert human beings from the oppressive awareness of their mortality. Houellebecq's depiction of the West is as brutal as it is despairing, for not only are we confronted with the social and psychological consequences of religion's decline, but we are also told that that decline is irreversible. Materialism has destroyed the legend of the Creator God, but the surpassing of materialism will rely not on a return to traditional religion, but on the surpassing of humanity itself.

While Houellebecq attempts to lend a great degree of credibility to this vision of Western religiosity, we do well to wonder about its accuracy. In reality, Houellebecq entertains in fictional form the advanced stages of an outmoded intellectual dogma known as *classical secularization theory*—the claim that with scientific modernity comes the decay and disappearance of religion. Secularization theory was a cornerstone of sociological thought for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but in recent decades its principal contention—that modernity and religion are mutually exclusive—has been shown by numerous scholars to be not only inadequate to describe current trends in Western religiosity, but on some accounts simply erroneous. Evidence for its failure is, moreover, entirely empirical: religion, as we will see in a moment, simply *persists*, in spite of modernity. Contemporary reformulations of secularization theory have, for example, attempted to place the emphasis not on the decline of religious belief

but rather on the decline of the authority of religious institutions (Chaves 1994, Yamane 1997), but the question that is begged on such analysis is whether, despite documented decline in the social or political importance of religion, people are fundamentally less pious, spiritual, or religious than they were in the past. From the perspective of many scholars, and in view of certain empirical data, the answer is a clear *no*.

Houellebecq, writing in the highly secular political context imposed by the French doctrine of laicism (*laïcité*), suggests that, as classical secularization theory predicts (that of such figures as Marx, Comte, Freud, Weber, Durkheim, as well as of other theorists from the 1960s, including Peter Berger (1967), Harvey Cox (1966), and Bryan Wilson (1966)), religion cannot survive the onslaught of modernity and the rationalizing and bureaucratizing forces unleashed (and facilitated) by industrialization. Scientific truth and enlightened rationality are incompatible with religious truth, and it is only a matter of time before religion disappears altogether. Society, however, in the Comtian (and, incidentally, Durkheimian) view to which Houellebecq is so beholden, depends on some kind of religious foundation. What, then, is to become of the West now that materialism, in Houellebecq's perspective, has become the dominant worldview? Houellebecq's characters are preoccupied by this question. As he lies in bed staring at his water heater, Djerzinski wonders,

De fait, se demandait-il, comment une société pourrait-elle subsister sans religion? Déjà, dans le cas d'un individu, ça paraissait difficile. Pendant plusieurs jours, il contempla le radiateur situé à gauche de son lit. En saison les cannelures se remplissaient d'eau chaude, c'était un mécanisme utile et ingénieux; mais combien de temps la société occidentale pourrait-elle subsister sans une religion quelconque (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 202)?

Houellebecq has expressed this point of view in his own comments and seems as concerned as Djerzinski is about the fate of a putatively post-religious West:

Il m'est évidemment impossible d'*établir* que se couper absolument du religieux équivaut, pour une société, à un suicide; ce n'est qu'une intuition; mais une intuition persistante (Houellebecq, 2008, p. 172).

Houellebecq's intuition is not unfounded, given the author's classically sociological assumptions, but rather errs in relying on those assumptions as authoritative. Societies absolutely cut off from religion are phantasms: while certain societies may sequester religion in the private domain and limit its public expression (such as happens in laical France), and while secularizing influences are surely at play in many cultures, as we will see in a moment even the most "secular" societies still maintain high levels of individual belief.⁴⁸ Furthermore, even in situations in which traditional religious belief may be in decline (as is the case in the Netherlands, certain data demonstrate (Achterberg, et al., 2009; Graff & Grotenhuis, 2008)), it is not at all clear that such decline is evidence of a linear or inevitable progress toward the "disappearance" of religion. Nothing, however, about recent findings in the sociology of religion (which I will discuss in more detail below) stops Houellebecq from proclaiming the death of religion—or at least of traditional religion—in his two prophetic novels, *Les particules élémentaires* and *La possibilité d'une île*, or from evoking it more obliquely in other works. In *Particules*, it is cloning, not faith, which solves the problem of existential anguish: a species of neo-humans is created whose members are putatively immortal. Where there is immortality, there is no need for religion; in the meantime, the remaining members of the godless human race slowly (and somewhat gleefully) go extinct. In *Possibilité*, we encounter

⁴⁸ Discussions of secularization, be they found in Houellebecq's novels or in academic scholarship, bear naturally on the Christian West and the particular fate of Christian civilization and Christian religion in the modern period (and also of Judaism, though the discussion here takes on a slightly different aspect, for obvious reasons). When we ask "whose France" Houellebecq is talking about, the answer is evidently *white, traditionally catholic* France, to the exclusion of Islam and other non-European and non-Christian cultures (a point which I will discuss in chapter three). In any event, questions about the influence of secularization on non-Western, non-Christian French communities would be much easier to address if the French state kept records of residents' religious affiliations.

much the same scenario: the Elohimite Church, a “religion” sans the supernatural, replaces the world’s extant religious traditions thanks to its promise of immortality through cloning. In both instances, the remedy to religious decline, and to the human misery that ensues, is scientific rather than spiritual, and it is only the new species that survives and prospers, while human beings are doomed to extinction.

Les particules élémentaires and *La possibilité d’une île* address what is an undeniable fact about many European countries: that the importance of Christianity as an institution that structures social existence has waned dramatically. In France, for example, statistics indicate that only 12.3 percent of French men and women attend Church once or more per month, while in the United States the figure is 61.1 percent (Pfaff, 2008, p. 30). Sociologists of religion do not always agree, however, on how to interpret this decline in religious practice, and their debates tend to center on precisely the way the concept of secularization is to be understood. Does the secularization of Europe mean simply the faltering of religious institutions’ political authority and influence on social organization? Does it denote the disappearance of overtly religious behavior, such as church attendance or having children baptized? Or is it rather the erosion of individual belief and the adoption of a materialistic worldview?⁴⁹ In Houellebecq’s fiction, the answer to all three questions is unhesitatingly affirmative: Christianity no longer structures social existence, outward commitment to religious practice is mostly absent, and atheism and materialism are widespread. Houellebecq’s novels tell the tale of

⁴⁹ Sociologist of religion Karel Dobbelaere argues for a three-level analysis of secularization as a phenomenon occurring in the institutional, societal, and individual realms. He writes, “Three levels of analysis clearly emerge from the reading of these studies: a societal, an institutional, and an individual, the last of which refers to changes in individual religiosity and changes in *religious involvement*. *Secularization*, then, denotes a societal process in which an overarching and transcendent religious system is being reduced to a sub-system of society alongside other sub-systems, the overarching claims of which have a shrinking relevance” (Dobbelaere, 1987, p. 117).

religious decline from the viewpoint of total secularization—at once private, institutional, and political—in which the onset of modernity brings about the disappearance of religion *tout court*. But is such a vision a trustworthy depiction of European religiosity? As we will see from the following survey of secularization theory, Houellebecq’s take on religion in Europe is far from accurate.

Secularization Theory: A Survey

Although classical theories of secularization were elaborated primarily in the nineteenth century, specifically within the context of the birth of sociology, the roots of such thinking lie, unsurprisingly, in the Enlightenment. Sociologist of religion Rodney Stark explains,

For nearly three centuries, social scientists and assorted western intellectuals have been promising the end of religion. Each generation has been confident that within another few decades, or possibly a bit longer, human beings will “outgrow” the supernatural. This proposition soon came to be known as the secularization thesis, and its earliest proponents seem to have been British, as the Restoration of 1660 led to an era during which militant attacks on faith were quite popular among fashionable Londoners. Thus, as far as I am able to discover, it was Thomas Woolston who first set a date by which time modernity would have triumphed over faith. Writing in 1710, he expressed his confidence that Christianity would be gone by 1900. Half a century later Frederick the Great thought this was much too pessimistic, writing to his friend Voltaire that “the Englishman Woolston... could not calculate what has happened quite recently... It is crumbling of itself, and its fall will be but the more rapid.” In response, Voltaire ventured his guess that the end would come within the next 50 years. Subsequently, not even widespread press reports concerning the second “Great Awakening” could deter Thomas Jefferson from predicting in 1822 that “there is not a young man now living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian...” (Stark, 1999, pp. 249-250)

The figures Stark discusses above are only forebears to the great secularization theorists of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Thinkers such as Auguste Comte, Max

Weber, Sigmund Freud, Emile Durkheim, and Karl Marx all played foundational roles in the creation of the field of sociology, and all produced in one manner or another those theories of secularization that were to be taken up in the second half of the twentieth century by various sociologists of religion (for instance, Peter Berger, cited below). Auguste Comte, the father of positivism and putative founder of sociology, argued that as humanity transitioned from a theological to a scientific understanding of the world, belief in the supernatural would disappear in favor of materialism. Materialism, however, was inimical to human happiness, and the importance of religion for social organization, as well as for individual psychological wellbeing, would remain unchanged. Comte therefore advocated a “Religion of Man” and a “Positivist Catechism” (Comte, 1968a, 1968b): though belief in God and immortality were to disappear, the *Grand-Être* Society would become an object of veneration, and persons could expect to achieve an abstract form of immortality in the memory of their descendents. Durkheim’s concerns over the secularization of society and its potentially deleterious consequences were inspired by the Comtian view that religion served as a fundamental source of social cohesion. Karl Marx predicted the end of religion as humanity acquired class-consciousness and rid itself of the need for an otherworldly paradise. In the Marxian view, religion was a psychic painkiller: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people... The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness” (Marx, 1994, pp. 57-58). Freud (1928) dismissed religion as powerful though childish illusion—a longing after the lost father—while Weber wrote in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, “The emancipation from economic traditionalism appears, no

doubt, to be a factor which would greatly strengthen the tendency to doubt the sanctity of the religious tradition, as of all traditional authorities” (Weber, 2010, p. 4). In the Weberian view, the decline of religion was closely linked to the (specifically economic) rationalization of the modern world.

The predictions of classical secularization theorists tended, however, to be more ideological than empirical, an assortment of often wishful prognostications that history has never confirmed. At best, they were the products of a time in which Western civilization was emerging from an era of religious domination, and in which new theories of the origins of life—i.e. Darwinism—were competing with traditionally religious explanations of the world. Jeffrey K. Hadden writes,

...Sociology emerged in Europe and America during a period of social upheaval that left intellectuals personally disillusioned with religion. The overwhelming influence of Darwinian thought during that period quickly shaped a theoretical perspective that postulated the imminent demise of religion. Our heritage, bequeathed by the founding generations, is scarcely a theory at all but, rather, a *doctrine of secularization*. It has not required careful scrutiny because it is self-evident. We have sacralized our commitment to secularization. (Hadden, 1987, p. 594)

For Marx, religion served as a palliative for inequality and exploitation: once social justice was achieved through revolution, religion would no longer serve a coherent social or psychological function. Freud was more openly hostile, associating religion with neurosis, while early-twentieth-century political regimes that were able to put secularization theory into practice—i.e. the Soviet Union—pursued their goal violently.⁵⁰ Even figures who were more sympathetic to religion, such as Comte and Durkheim, saw its decline as an inevitable consequence of scientific modernity and

⁵⁰ “The violence waged against religious leaders, activists, and followers during the 1930s cannot be overstated. Tens of thousands of clergy and religious adherents were sent into the horrific prison camp system of the Gulag, never to be heard from again” (Froese, 2008, p. 8).

rationalism, with Comte attempting to elaborate a quasi-religious system of belief and practice to fill the vacuum, and Durkheim worrying that the lack of social cohesion produced by secularization would result in widespread social anomie.⁵¹ Though it would be ill-advised to draw strict parallels between these thinkers' views on religion, as well as to assume that their theoretical motives were similar, in general terms one can claim with confidence that classical secularization theories expressed great assurance—though at times also great concern—that religion would soon disappear, and that its disappearance, affecting both social and political institutions as well as individual piety and conviction, would be total.

Theories of religious change that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century would prove the confidence of classical secularization theorists to be excessive. To be sure, numerous theorists during the 1960s continued to support the classical position on secularization. Peter Berger, for instance, wrote in the highly influential book *The Sacred Canopy*,

By secularization we mean the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols. When we speak of society and institutions in modern Western history, of course, secularization manifests itself in the evacuation by the Christian churches of areas previously under their control or influence—as in the separation of church and state, or in the expropriation of church lands, or in the emancipation of education from ecclesiastical authority. When we speak of culture and symbols, however, we imply that secularization is more than a social-structural process. It affects the totality of cultural life and of ideation, and may be observed in the decline

⁵¹ To be sure, Durkheim did not state categorically that religion would disappear altogether. His position on the future of religion seems in fact to have been ambiguous. While, for example, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, he writes, “There is then something eternal in religion which is destined to survive all the particular symbols which have successively veiled religious,” he nonetheless adds later on, with regard to science, “From now on, faith no longer exercises over the system of *représentations*, which we can continue to call religious, the same hegemony as before. Confronting it stands a rival power, its offspring which will subject it to its own criticism and control. All the signs indicate that this control will continually increase and be ever more effective, while no limit can possibly be fixed on its future influence” (Durkheim, 1994, pp. 156, 160-161).

of religious contents in the arts, in philosophy, in literature, and, most important of all, in the rise of science as an autonomous, thoroughly secular perspective on the world. Moreover, it is implied here that the process of secularization has a subjective side as well. As there is a secularization of society and culture, so there is a secularization of consciousness. Put simply, this means that the modern West has produced an increasing number of individuals who look upon the world and their own lives without the benefit of religious interpretations (Berger, 1967, p. 105).

And yet, at this very same time, scholars had already begun to question the intelligibility of secularization theory as a paradigm for understanding religiosity in the West. In perhaps the most famous example of scholarly dissent, sociologist David Martin in 1965 sent shock waves through the sociological community by “proposing that the concept of secularization be eliminated from social scientific discourse on the grounds that it had served only ideological and polemical, rather than theoretical functions and because there was no evidence in favor [of it]” (Stark, 1999, p. 254). Martin wrote later on, summarizing his previous comments,

About a quarter of a century ago I was one of the first among sociologists, perhaps even *the* first, to place a question mark against a version of the theory of secularization which envisaged a steady shift from a religious period in human affairs to a secular period. I tried to argue that such a theory was not so much rooted in empirical data as in philosophies of history of a rationalist or Marxist kind, and in philosophical anthropologies proclaiming the emergence of a breed of humankind freed from the trammels and delusions of false faith. I also argued that the notion of secularization was itself internally incoherent and that the whole discussion was bedeviled by shifts in definition, and the manipulation of criteria, so that it became difficult to know when one was comparing like with like, over time and cultural space. Worst of all, in my view, was a pervasive epiphenomenalism which could selectively, or even in principle, declare religion to be “really” something else as, for example, political frustration, or nationalism, in order to fit religion into whatever the dictates of sociological theory might be. In this manner actual history... was sucked up, subsumed and redistributed by the machinery of sociological assumptions and concepts (Martin, 1991, pp. 465-466).

Other scholars have made similar comments about the problematic nature of classical secularization theory, including Chaves (1994), Hadden (1987), Stark & Iannaccone (1994), Berger (1997), and Demerath (2007); and while certain of these writers and other sociologists still contend that the concept of secularization may be retained in a more limited role, few are those who would challenge the move away from classical accounts. It is telling that Peter Berger, whose work on secularization represented perhaps the definitive *mise-à-jour*, or updating, of the classical model in the twentieth century, squarely repudiates the earlier position he took in *The Sacred Canopy*, writing,

I think what I and most other sociologists of religion wrote in the 1960s about secularization was a mistake. Our underlying argument was that secularization and modernity go hand in hand. With more modernization comes more secularization. It wasn't a crazy theory. There was some evidence for it. But I think it's basically wrong. Most of the world today is certainly not secular. It's very religious. So is the U.S. The one exception to this is Western Europe. One of the most interesting questions in the sociology of religion is not, How do you explain fundamentalism in Iran? but, Why is Western Europe different? (Berger, 1997, p. 974)

In the wake of such reversals, many of these same theorists have attempted to reformulate secularization theory on non-classical criteria; I will discuss these attempts below. In the meantime, what factors led to such skepticism about classical secularization theory in the first place?

The most obvious reason for classical secularization theory's demise is its near-total lack of empirical validity in the context of individual religious conviction. Any look at recent polling of European religious belief shows that a large majority of Europeans believe in God or a higher power, in spite of broad declines in participation in religious ritual. The 2005 Eurobarometer study of European social values indicates that 52% of Europeans believe in God, while 27% believe in "some sort of spirit or life force." Only

18% claimed to believe in neither. According to the report, Malta shows the highest percentage of theism, with 95% of Maltese responding that they believe in God. In France, 34% of respondents said they believed in God, with another 27% claiming belief in a “spirit or life force.” Even in countries where the rate of theism is dismal (such as the Czech Republic, Estonia, and Sweden), belief in “spirit” places faith in some kind of transcendent reality at or above fifty percent (European Commission, 2005). Thus, while it is true that Europe’s political institutions are secularized and institutional Christianity has been in decline for some time, empirical data clearly demonstrate that the majority of Europeans retain a belief in some form of transcendent reality.

However, personal piety put aside for one moment, how does one explain at the very least the diminution of traditional religion’s social-structuring power in a country like France, for instance? Cannot some limited, or reformulated, conception of secularization be employed to analyze such phenomena as a drop in church attendance? Rodney Stark (1999; 1994; 1992) and other “market theorists” of religion, such as Laurence Iannaccone (1994) and Roger Finke (1992), have argued that declines in religious behavior—*not* personal piety—can in fact be explained not by changes in mentality but rather in terms of *religious supply and demand*. Where classical secularization theorists might have taken lack of outward religiosity to demonstrate an absence of internal conviction, Stark and company respond that decline in religious practice among Europeans is the result of a dearth of religious supply.⁵² Stark and Iannaccone write,

⁵² For those who are not familiar with the market theory of religion, Steven Pfaff offers some helpful explanations in the recent anthology *Growing Apart: America and Europe in the 21st Century*: “...American religious firms have become more competitive and hence more successful because of the predictable consequences of the constitutional separation of church and state. Conversely, where the state

Although it is abundantly clear that an immense amount of desacralization has occurred in much of Europe... it is equally clear that unregulated and pluralistic religious economies are, at best, only beginning to appear. In most of these nations, and especially in those counted as among the most secularized, religious subsidies and regulations, both official and de facto, continue to stunt and distort the religious marketplace (Stark and Iannaccone, 1994, p. 236).

In this view, overtly secularizing policies and laical ideologies, which are perhaps most pronounced in France, have essentially stymied the flourishing of religious alternatives. In France, for example, the traditional institutional distinction between Church and sect—which implicitly favors Catholicism and vilifies new religious movements as dangerous—produces an environment in which French citizens, smothered under the dead weight of a defunct Catholicism and yet warned away from “cults” by laical state ideologies, have little sense of their religious options (Fath, 2005, pp. 408, 414). The market theory of religion predicts that if new religious movements are allowed to proliferate and flourish in a population, religiosity will increase.⁵³ Rather than being on a slow path toward total secularization, Europeans (and especially the French) are in fact *starved for religion* by state policies and laical ideologies that implicitly favor established yet increasingly obsolete churches.

In later work, Stark suggests that the concept of secularization be removed from sociological discourse altogether, arguing that his analysis of religious trends in Europe is indicative not of secularization but merely of *religious change*. In his perspective, the

regulates religious activities and (perhaps worse) subsidizes particular religions, those firms lose touch with their “customer” base and cease adapting to the changing marketplace through innovation in organization, products, and services. As a result, where religious monopolies and oligopolies have been established, churches tend to be empty despite very great expenditures to support them” (Pfaff, 2008, p. 26).

⁵³ “... Where religious goods are largely provided by an established authority, there should be less collective action on that basis (many formal church members will be tempted to free-ride). In those societies, the laity is mostly passive and religious group membership becomes associated with membership in the state. Only when growing pluralism (as through immigration) or institutional reforms threaten the resources and privileges to which the established faiths are accustomed will their leaders mobilize politically or challenge the state” (Pfaff, 2008, p. 28).

question of individual piety and belief in the supernatural is of primary concern, and focus on “secularizing” phenomena such as loss of interest in having children baptized, for example, is not only beside the point, but ignores the totalizing spirit in which the disappearance of religion was proclaimed by classical secularization theorists (Stark, 1999). Other sociologists, however, have been reluctant to do away with the concept altogether, preferring instead to modify it to describe changes in religiosity not necessarily—or at least traditionally—linked to individual belief. If secularization is a process whose historical outcome is theorized to be the vanishing of personal piety, then yes, such a theory deserves to *requiescat in pace*, as Stark (1999) has suggested. However, if secularization theory can be reconceived along different lines, which avoid defining the process as a linear movement toward the evaporation of individual conviction, it becomes possible to retain the paradigm without indulging in the excess of its initial formulation.

This is in fact what a number of theorists have done. In one of the most influential attempts to rehabilitate secularization theory in light of its opponents’ criticisms, Mark Chaves (1994) argues that the scope of secularization theory be reduced to include only the notion of declining religious authority. Drawing on the work of Bryan Wilson (1985), who understood secularization as the decline of religion’s social significance,⁵⁴ Chaves maintains that secularization theory reconfigured as such can be employed to investigate how social, institutional, and individual indifference toward traditional religious authority structures affects religious phenomena in contemporary

⁵⁴ “Nor does the [secularization] model predict the disappearance of religiosity, nor even of organized religion; it merely indicates the decline in the significance of religion in the operation of the social system” (Wilson, 1985, p. 14).

societies.⁵⁵ Other theorists, including Yamane (1997),⁵⁶ have followed Chaves' lead, while Danièle Hervieu-Léger (1990) has suggested that secularization theory be reformulated to address the ways in which modernity fails to satisfy the spiritual and existential needs it creates.⁵⁷ Researchers Achterberg et al. (2009) argue that secularizing and de-secularizing forces are involved in a constant tug-of-war in Western European countries such as the Netherlands,⁵⁸ while David Martin (discussed above), offers that secularization theory be retained only in the case of Western Europe.⁵⁹ Frank Lechner (1991) even goes so far as to claim that secularization should be preserved as a sociological concept simply because issues of individual belief, being individual, have nothing to do with sociology.⁶⁰ In view of these and many other efforts that I do not have the space to discuss here, secularization theory—reformulated as a “neo-secularization paradigm” (Yamane, 1997)—may be retained as a concept that sheds light on the declining social significance of religion, though which can no longer be taken to predict

⁵⁵ “Maintaining such a distinction between religion’s influence and the mere existence of religious beliefs and sentiments among individuals represents an enduring contribution and will be fundamental to any valid notion of secularization” (Chavez, 1994, p. 752).

⁵⁶ “Neosecularization theory suggests that while the *quantities* of individual religious beliefs and behaviors may be high, as in the United States, these are not the relevant data. What needs to be assessed is the orientation people have to religious authority structures. A secularized society is one in which people will feel free to believe and act in ways which differ from or even go against the prescribed views of religious authorities. People’s views will be characterized by autonomy and choice” (Yamane, 1997, p. 116).

⁵⁷ “[Secularization] is no longer considered as the “decline” of religion in the modern world, but as a process of the reorganization of the work of religion in a society which can no longer satisfy (not temporarily, but structurally) the expectations it must arouse in order to exist as such, and which can find no better response (not temporarily, but structurally) to the uncertainties arising from the interminable quest for the means to satisfy these expectations” (Hervieu-Léger, 1990, p. S24).

⁵⁸ “...Religious decline seems to go along with increasing desires for deprivatization, indicating secularization and desecularization, respectively, and as ruling out the possibility of ‘all-out’ claims about ‘whether or not’ secularization takes place. Though Christians in the West have experienced substantial declines in terms of sheer numbers, our findings hence suggest that they have become less rather than more likely to accept the ‘secularist truce’—the secularist contract that guarantees religious freedom, yet bans religion from the public sphere by relegating it to the private realm” (Achterberg, et al., 2009, pp. 697-698).

⁵⁹ “It was in Europe that the sociological model of secularization was devised, and that is perhaps where it belongs” (Martin, 1991, p. 473).

⁶⁰ “...The common though incorrect inference is that continued faith on the part of significant, even growing numbers of individuals refutes secularization theory. The very idea is unsociological” (Lechner, 1991, p. 1111).

the outright disappearance of individual piety. Secularization theory can thus foretell and describe the effects of structural and social changes in religious phenomena, but it can no longer boast the totalizing explanatory power characteristic of its classical formulation.

Nevertheless, it may legitimately be wondered if the diminution of overt religious behavior indicated by well-documented declines in church attendance and participation in religious ritual in Western Europe does not have some effect on individual piety. Stark, as mentioned above, argues that personal belief is the real bone of contention in the secularization debate, and that evidence against its demise in the broader context of disintegration of traditional religious institutions (such as, for example, Catholicism in certain European countries) only demonstrates that phenomena of *religious change*, not secularization, are taking place. However, what this analysis fails to address is the *qualitative effect* on personal belief of such changes. Does the disappearance of an institutional context weaken the conviction associated with personal piety? Does not attending church make one less sure about one's religious beliefs? Essentially, might the emergence of a kind of "fuzzy fidelity" (Voas, 2009) resulting from de-institutionalized belief indicate that the continuity of religious conviction in such environments is uncertain? While the majority of Europeans claim to believe in a transcendent reality, it is possible that the nature of that conviction is qualitatively different from belief during periods in which outward, collective religious behavior was more common.⁶¹ But what such diminution does not prove is that science and materialism are "winning out" over religion, even if their effects have forced members of the Western intellectual elite into a

⁶¹ And it is even questioned in Stark (1999) and Stark and Iannaccone (1994) whether such a period ever existed—but I will not pursue this question here.

position of “epistemological modesty” concerning religious claims (Berger, 1997).⁶² If the religious market theorists are right, it will only take a few sparks of religious revival, as well as concerted efforts at deregulation at the political level, for organized religion to once again become the norm in “secular” Europe.

Whatever the case may be concerning religion’s status and fate in the “secularized” environment of contemporary Western Europe—that is, whether personal piety has been weakened by science and institutional decline, or whether it is simply waiting to find new forms of expression (and probably it is a simplification to isolate these two movements as antagonistic)—it is clear on the data discussed above that Houellebecq’s portrayal of a contemporary West won over by atheism and materialism hits remarkably wide of the mark. As “materialist horror” Houellebecq’s fiction cannot be expected to be as credible as its often clinical tone might lead us to believe, but even so the author has made his thoughts about religion clear on more than one occasion,⁶³ and his broader comments on European religiosity and the “death of God” place him squarely in the camp of the classical secularization theorists, specifically Auguste Comte. Houellebecq is either uninterested in or unaware of the complexities involved in the study of contemporary European religion, and the result is that novels such as *Les particules élémentaires* and *La possibilité d’une île* present a vision of the contemporary West in which religious change and the epistemological hegemony of science are wrongly interpreted as markers of total secularization. In the following section, I will review the

⁶² “Epistemological modesty means that you believe certain things, but you’re modest about these claims. You can be a believer and yet say, I’m not really sure. I think that is a fundamental fault line” (Berger, 1997, p. 978).

⁶³ For instance, “En ma personne nous sommes déjà en présence de la deuxième génération d’*athées absolus*—athées non seulement religieux, mais politiques. A ce stade l’athéisme n’a plus rien de joyeux, d’héroïque ni de libérateur ; il ne s’accompagne d’aucun anticléricalisme, il n’a plus rien de *militant* non plus. C’est quelque chose de froid, de désespéré, vécu sur le mode de l’incapacité pure ; un espace blanc, opaque, dans lequel on avance péniblement, un hiver définitif” (Houellebecq, 2008, p. 174).

details of this peculiarly Houellebecquian stance, specifically as it relates to the causal link between materialism and suicide, and then suggest how we might understand its cultural relevance in light of recent reappraisals of secularization theory.

Houellebecq, Materialism, and Suicide: Logical Consequences of The “Death of God” in Western Civilization

Les particules élémentaires and *La possibilité d'une île* track the demise of a moribund West whose hedonistic preoccupations and irreligious ethos have ravaged the psychological wellbeing of its members. While the former novel deals specifically with the individual effects of materialism on two characters—half brothers Bruno and Michel—the latter speculates on the future of religion in the West and depicts the birth and rise of Elohimism, a new religious movement that supplants European Christianity and goes on to vanquish Islam and the other world faith traditions. Houellebecq had elaborated his thoughts on the consequences of religious decline long before he ever thought to tell the stories of Bruno and Daniel. In his 1992 essay *Approches du désarroi*, the author writes,

La mort de Dieu en Occident a constitué le prélude d'un formidable feuilleton métaphysique, qui se poursuit jusqu'à nos jours. Tout historien des mentalités serait à même de reconstituer le détail des étapes; disons pour résumer que le christianisme réussissait ce *coup de maître* de combiner la croyance farouche en l'individu... avec la promesse de participation éternelle à l'Être absolu. Une fois le rêve évanoui, diverses tentatives furent faites pour promettre à l'individu un minimum d'être; pour concilier le rêve d'être qu'il portait en lui avec l'omniprésence obsédante du devenir. Toutes ces tentatives, jusqu'à présent, ont échoué, et le malheur a continué à s'étendre (Houellebecq, 2009, p. 41).

Much of Houellebecq's creative work subsequent to this declaration has concerned filling in the details that this historical narrative presumes, with a novel such as *Les particules*

élémentaires offering a particular account of the *étendue du malheur*. Below, I will focus on this earlier text, since much of the discussion of religious decline in *La possibilité d'une île* simply recapitulates material in *Particules*.

Houellebecq's award-winning second novel, which appeared in 1998, tells the story of half brothers Bruno and Michel, one a sex-obsessed, embittered high school French teacher, the other a depressive, self-absorbed biophysicist, whose lives unravel as they enter middle age. Bruno and Michel are the sons of Janine Ceccaldi, an aging libertine who abandons both children to their respective grandmothers in order to pursue a life of sexual freedom. Bruno, a divorcee who is estranged from his son, frequents nudist resorts and sex colonies in order to satisfy his obsessive sexual desires, though he eventually meets Christiane, also an aging libertine (a *soixante-huitard*, as she calls herself, referring to her sympathies for the student revolts of 1968), whom Bruno begins to date seriously. However, when Christiane is paralyzed from the waist down in a macabre swingers club accident, Bruno hesitates in offering to take care of his now sexually non-functional lover. In despair, Christiane commits suicide, and Bruno, wracked by guilt and anguish, ends up in a mental institution, where a regimen of lithium and other psychotropic drugs effectively castrates him. Michel, on the other hand, is a brilliant but deeply alienated biophysicist who lives his life at a distance from other human beings. Michel has avoided a serious relationship all his life, but when at age forty he crosses paths with his high school sweetheart, Annabelle, the two begin dating and she becomes pregnant. Sadly, doctors soon discover that Annabelle has uterine cancer, which spreads to her intestine. Abandoning all hope of recovery, Annabelle takes her life. After her death, Michel, heartbroken yet strangely composed, leaves France to

pursue his research in Ireland, where after a period of ten years he makes discoveries in genetics that will soon allow the human race to replace itself with a species of immortal and asexual clones. At novel's end, the narrator, whom Houellebecq reveals to be one of the future clones, praises the human race for its perseverance despite itself and dedicates the story of Bruno and Michel to a now nearly extinct mankind.

Bruno and Michel's tragedy runs deeper than the loss of their lovers and their mother's poor parenting. Houellebecq is not an author who is satisfied with uniquely psychological descriptions—his characters are as much the symptoms of broad cultural and historical tendencies as they are individual agents responsible for their own suffering. Thus we may read of Bruno,

Pouvait-on considérer Bruno comme un individu? Le pourrissement de ses organes lui appartenait, c'est à titre individuel qu'il connaîtrait le déclin physique et la mort. D'un autre côté sa vision hédoniste de la vie, les champs de forces qui structuraient sa conscience et ses désirs appartenaient à l'ensemble de sa génération. De même que l'installation d'une préparation expérimentale et le choix d'un ou plusieurs observables permettent d'assigner à un système atomique un comportement donné—tantôt corpusculaire, tantôt ondulatoire—, de même Bruno pouvait apparaître comme un individu, mais d'un autre point de vue il n'était que l'élément passif du déploiement d'un mouvement historique. Ses motivations, ses valeurs, ses désirs: rien de tout cela ne le distinguait, si peu que ce soit, de ses contemporains (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 221).

Bruno's selfishness, his lovers' fates, and his mother's negligence are only superficial causes of his malaise—Bruno's ultimate undoing lies in his unwitting subjugation to the prevailing materialism of his time. In Bruno's view, the loss of belief in immortality lies at the root of religion's decline in Western civilization, and subsequently has given rise to a cult youth in which he, now middle-aged, is forbidden to participate. He explains,

À partir du moment où on ne croit plus à la vie éternelle, il n'y a plus de religion possible. Et si la société est impossible sans religion... il n'y a plus de société possible non plus. Tu [Djerzinski] me fais penser à ces

sociologues qui s'imaginent que le culte de la jeunesse est une mode passagère née dans les années 50, ayant connu son apogée au cours des années 80, etc. En réalité l'homme a toujours été terrorisé par la mort, il n'a jamais pu envisager sans terreur la perspective de sa propre disparition, ni même de son propre déclin. De tous les biens terrestres, la jeunesse physique est à l'évidence le plus précieux ; et nous ne croyons plus aujourd'hui qu'aux biens terrestres (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 321).

Aware of the depravity and wickedness of his world, Bruno does nothing to change it. Rather, he wallows in his own dissipation and in the end fails to understand why his life has been destroyed. After Christiane's suicide, we read, "Il savait que sa vie était finie, mais il ne comprenait pas la fin" (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 311). Rather than commit suicide, Bruno is institutionalized, and the last we see of him is at his mother's death, where he promises to urinate on her ashes every day (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 319). Michel, meanwhile, manages to avoid insanity, though he nevertheless makes a quick exit from life once his work is complete. Djerzinski is a man for whom being itself is a burden; as soon as he has left instructions for how the species is to put and end to its "dismal journey"⁶⁴ (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 107), he hurls himself into the sea.

The number of suicides in *Les particules élémentaires* is one of the most memorable and troubling aspects of the text. Aside from Michel, we have Christiane and Annabelle, Bruno's adolescent fling, Annick (an obese and profoundly ugly girl who throws herself from the top of a Parisian apartment building), and, of course, the human race. Houellebecq's second novel is suicidal ideation pushed to the extreme: the outright, consensual eradication of the human race and its replacement by an improved species. Suicide in this context is no longer viewed as a sin that lands one in eternal perdition, but rather as a reasonable solution to intense or needless suffering. Annabelle's justification

⁶⁴ My translation of "pénible périple."

for administering herself a lethal dose of painkillers is exemplary of the prevailing mentality:

...une bifurcation s'était produite dans son corps, une bifurcation imprévisible et injustifiée; et maintenant son corps ne pouvait plus être une source de bonheur et de joie. Il allait au contraire, progressivement mais en fait assez vite, devenir pour elle-même comme pour les autres une source de gêne et de malheur. Par conséquent, il fallait détruire son corps. (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 348).

Annabelle's reasoning about suicide is one of Houellebecq's clearest demonstrations of materialism's inexorable logic: that there is only the body, and that the body is either a source of pleasure or pain—and reason dictates that once the body can no longer be counted on to provide pleasure, it is to be abandoned. From the Christian point of view, suicide is a sin not simply because life is sacred, but more importantly because God has a plan for human life and decides the moment of death for each of us. Trespassing against divine will in this respect risks everlasting damnation, or at best an extended stay in purgatory. Of course, in *Les particules élémentaires*, divine prohibition on suicide is a historical curiosity: whether to live or die is, at least theologically speaking, entirely the choice of the individual. What determines that choice is the state of the body: where the body suffers, life is worthless; where the body rejoices, life is worthwhile. The decision of Jed Martin's father in *La carte et le territoire* to commit suicide reiterates this point of view:

...Ce qu'il fallait que [Jed] se mette dans la tête ce qu'il ne pouvait plus être bien *nulle part*, qu'il ne pouvait plus être bien *dans la vie en général*... S'il devait encore continuer il allait falloir lui changer son anus artificiel, enfin il trouvait que ça commençait à suffire, cette plaisanterie. Et puis il avait mal, il souffrait trop (Houellebecq, 2010a, p. 343).

In Houellebecq's novels, the effort to alleviate human suffering has shifted from traditional attempts to encourage sufferers to find meaning in their pain, to a focus on

altering the body so that its propensity to experience suffering is reduced as much as possible. The creation of races of neo-human clones in *Particules* and *Possibilité* is the unsurprising consequence of this disturbing transformation.

The causal account we encounter in *Les particules élémentaires* is one in which the strict association of being with embodiment, and with it the dismissal of any notion of divine purpose for human life, leads to a broad cultural apology for suicide. Houellebecq borrows much of his commentary on suicide from Arthur Schopenhauer, who argued that the legal denunciation of killing oneself was “vulgar bigotry” (Schopenhauer, 2006, p. 25). Schopenhauer associated the prohibition on self-slaughter with the monotheistic religions and specifically with Christianity, writing, “The inmost kernel of Christianity is the truth that suffering—the Cross—is the real end and object of life. Hence Christianity condemns suicide as thwarting this end...” (Schopenhauer, 2006, p. 29). With Christianity out of the picture, however, Schopenhauer’s point of view can prevail. Suicide can be committed with impunity, or at the very least without worry of damnation, as we see in *Les particules élémentaires* and *La carte et le territoire*.

Materialism and suicide are causally linked in *Les particules élémentaires* (and indirectly so in *La carte et le territoire*), with the former providing the philosophical groundwork for the justification of the latter. Yet, when we consider Houellebecq’s misleading assumptions about the prevalence of materialism among contemporary Europeans, it becomes difficult to think that this very Schopenhauerian apology for killing yourself should succeed in rallying majority approval.⁶⁵ *Les particules*

⁶⁵ I do not mean to insinuate here that Houellebecq approves of suicide. In *La carte et le territoire*, for example, the novel's protagonist, Jed Martin, viciously attacks the Swiss German doctor who has euthanized his elderly father. Jed is never arrested for his crime, and Houellebecq writes, “...probablement ne souhaitaient-ils pas attirer l’attention sur leurs activités, en aucune manière. Il y avait peut-être du

élémentaires makes every effort to read as a realist text—a tome of social commentary that finds echo in likes of *Père Goriot* and *Madame Bovary*—but if that realism is disingenuous, what insights are to be gained from Houellebecq’s broader treatment of the Death of God in contemporary culture? How is Houellebecq’s commentary on suicide and the putative moral collapse of the post-Christian West to be read, if we cannot take it literally? My remarks in the remainder of this chapter will be aimed at salvaging the informative aspects of Houellebecq’s depiction of Western secularism from the overall inaccuracies of his view.

Houellebecq and The Myth of A Post-Religious West

Houellebecq’s comments about religious decline are perhaps more about France than they are about Europe. Indeed, in the 2005 Eurobarometer report on European social values, the percentage of French men and women who claimed to believe neither in God nor a “spirit” was higher than that of any other European country by an average of approximately 22 percentage points (an average of 17% in all other E.U. member states compared to 39% in France) (European Commission, 2005). When Houellebecq writes that “Au milieu du suicide occidental, il était clair qu’ils n’avaient aucune chance” (referring to Michel and Annabelle’s belated attempt to have a relationship) (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 295), it is thus difficult to believe that his remarks bear any relationship to prevailing conditions in Western society. The United States, with its

vrai... dans les accusations relayées sur Internet portant sur l’enrichissement personnel des membres de l’association. Une euthanasie était facturée en moyenne cinq mille euros, alors que la dose létale de pentobarbital de sodium revenait à vingt euros... Sur un marché en pleine expansion, où la Suisse était en situation de quasi-monopole, ils devaient, effet, *se faire des couilles en or*” (Houellebecq, 2010a, p. 376). If anything, Houellebecq condemns suicide on Kantian terms, as the destruction of the subject of the moral law (Houellebecq, 2010a, p. 344).

perennially high rates of religiosity and recent resurgence of Christian fundamentalism, represents an obvious and devastating counterexample to Houellebecq’s claims about the “death of God,” while the preponderance of belief in countries such as Malta and the Baltic states, the latter having suffered Soviet attempts to eradicate religion altogether, also provides evidence that the author has exaggerated his depictions of Western religiosity. Most damning of all is that even in France, the most secular of all European nations according to statistics, more than three-fifths of people believe in God or a higher power, despite endemic lack of interest in collective religious expression.⁶⁶

Houellebecq can of course claim that secularization is just around the corner, and that those who still believe in God are “idiots” (Houellebecq, 2001b), but as I have shown above various intellectuals have been saying the same thing for centuries. Revealing his seemingly total ignorance of work done in the twentieth century on the issue of secularization, the author appears to have taken Auguste Comte’s law of three stages,⁶⁷ according to which civilization passes from a theological to a metaphysical and finally to a scientific, positive, and implicitly materialist stage, and applied it across the board to all

⁶⁶ In another context, it may be legitimate to wonder what the term higher power refers to in the majority of responses. For instance, one can conceive of transcendence in either worldly or otherworldly—or perhaps material or immaterial—terms. Survival of bodily death, reunion with the deity, etc., are traditionally otherworldly forms of transcendence, while childbirth or sex, for example, can be considered mundane forms of transcendence. In Houellebecq’s novels, sex is often treated as a form of escape from material, mortal reality. For example, Daniel says of a sexual experience with Esther in *La possibilité d’une île*,

La vue brouillée par la sueur, ayant perdu toute notion claire de l’espace et du temps, je parvins cependant à prolonger encore un peu ce moment, et sa langue eut le temps d’effectuer trois rotations complètes avant que je ne jouisse, et ce fut alors comme si tout mon corps irradié par le plaisir s’évanouissait, aspiré par le néant, dans un déferlement d’énergie bienheureuse. Elle me garda dans sa bouche, presque immobile, tétant mon sexe au ralenti, fermant les yeux comme pour mieux entendre les hurlements de mon bonheur (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 326).

We should remember, however, that the forms of mundane transcendence that Houellebecq presents in his work are only fleeting and cannot survive the decline of the body. In this regard, it is helpful to point to the Elohimite cult in *Possibilité*: here we have a putative “religion” without even the slightest reference to otherworldly reality or immaterial transcendence. Rather, the possibility of mundane transcendence is preserved through serial cloning, which ensures a physical immortality of sorts. In the case of the Eurobarometer poll, however, the use of the words “spirit” and “life force” in the polling question have an obviously immaterial referent. That is, they point to something beyond the mundane.

⁶⁷ See footnote 35.

of Western civilization. Houellebecq begins and ends his analysis of contemporary European religiosity at the very starting point of sociological thought—Comtian positivism—with seeming little concern for the myriad ways in which that thought has evolved in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thus we find him writing in the *Lettre à Lakis Proguidis*:

Sans nul doute, le XXe siècle restera comme l'âge du triomphe dans l'esprit du grand public d'une explication scientifique du monde, associée par lui à une ontologie matérialiste et au principe de déterminisme local (Houellebecq, 2009, p. 152).

In *Les particules élémentaires*, Djerzinski's colleague Desplechin describes the fate of religious belief in the era of modern science along similar lines:

“...J'en suis venu à penser que les religions sont avant tout des tentatives d'explication du monde; et aucune tentative d'explication du monde ne peut tenir si elle se heurte à notre besoin de certitude rationnelle. La preuve mathématique, la démarche expérimentale sont des acquis définitifs de la conscience humaine. Je sais bien que les faits semblent me contredire, je sais bien que l'Islam—de loin la plus bête, la plus fausse et plus obscurantiste de toutes les religions—semble actuellement gagner du terrain; mais ce n'est qu'un phénomène superficiel et transitoire: à long terme l'Islam est condamné, encore plus sûrement que le christianisme” (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 335).

Comparable formulations can be found in Auguste Comte's work. Statements in the *Catéchisme positiviste* such as “Toute doctrine religieuse repose nécessairement sur une explication quelconque du monde et de l'homme, double objet continu de nos pensées théoriques et pratiques” (Comte, 1968a, p. 51)—or, perhaps even more interesting, “L'Orient⁶⁸ et l'Occident doivent donc chercher, hors de toute théologie ou métaphysique, les bases systématiques de leur communion intellectuelle et morale” (Comte, 1968a, p. 9)—bear an evident similarity to Desplechin's confession. We may wonder, in any event, how seriously we should take Houellebecq when he invokes a

⁶⁸ In the text, “L'Orient” refers to Islam, not to the religions of East Asia.

perspective that appears to treat religion as little more than a failed epistemological forebear to modern science. Surely religion involves more than simply describing the nature of reality; the fact that it survives in spite of rationalistic attempts to explain the existence of life and the universe indicates that religion's function is more diverse than the Houellebecquian perspective suggests. Durkheim, who argued that religion in fact served a dual function of both explaining the world and uniting society, makes an apposite comment on this point:

Of the two functions that religion originally fulfilled, there is one and only one which is showing an increasing tendency to fall outside the scope of religion, that is, its speculative function. There is but one point at issue between science and religion: it is not the right of religion to exist, it is its right to dogmatize about the nature of things, and the special competence religion claims for itself to know about man and the world (Durkheim, 1994, p. 159).

And even here, matters are not so clear as Durkheim would have us think. For it would be an act of elitism to assume that all those who accept a traditionally religious—or at least not strictly rationalistic or materialistic—view of the world should somehow be self-deceived, delusional, or ignorant of science.

Houellebecq's comments about European religious decline, be they expressed by a character or by the author himself, clearly do not implicate all of Western civilization, nor do they advance the argument that religiosity in countries such as France has yielded to materialism. Even those neo-secularization theorists who have attempted to redefine secularization theory as describing only the decline of religion's social significance and authority are helpless to deny the persistence of personal conviction in otherwise "secular" states. If Houellebecq's materialist horror stories are to be considered illuminating cultural documents, perhaps we must understand them either as cautionary

tales (an unappealing option) or as exaggerated yet thought-provoking portrayals of a worldview applying to individual or micro-social elements of a more religious culture.

Olivier Bardolle writes,

Tout ne va pas si mal, mais l'artiste de plume a besoin de l'exagération pour décrire le réel qu'il ressent (et non le vrai réel)... Il s'agit d'un procédé artistique qui consiste à forcer le trait pour se faire bien comprendre, mais aussi pour se singulariser, pour émerger du lot, ce qui amène très vite à la surenchère la plus débridée et parfois à l'illisibilité pure et simple (Bardolle, 2003, p. 51).

Houellebecq's depiction of post-Christian Western modernity seems not to incriminate the West as a whole but rather certain of its members, in particular the author himself, who suffer from forms of doubt, skepticism, and fear of mortality and physical decline that are presumably as old as humanity itself. As a writer who frequently crosses the boundary between novelist and social commentator, Houellebecq is within his rights to exaggerate and aestheticize as he sees fit. But in a body of work whose tone and style are so coolly realist, the reader may understandably feel troubled by what in the end looks more like misrepresentation than aesthetic overstatement.

Nonetheless—we must inquire to what extent the secular and laical leanings of modern France have produced spiritual malaise even among that majority of French men and women who do claim to believe in a transcendent reality. As I suggested above, secularization may be reconceived of as a process in which the decline of religion's social significance causes a *qualitative* change in the nature of religious conviction, i.e., a drop in the fervor or certainty of belief associated with its de-collectivization. If we can adapt Houellebecq's portrayal of "post-religious" Europe to this conception of secularization, the author's discussion of the personal and social consequences of atheism and materialism begins to make much more sense. Houellebecq's description of priest Jean-

Pierre Buvet's loss of faith in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* is a telling example of the fate of religion without community. Buvet describes the collapse of his diocese to the narrator:

Je t'avais dit que Vitry n'est pas une paroisse facile; c'est encore pire que ce que tu peux imaginer. Depuis mon arrivée j'ai essayé de monter des groupes de jeunes; aucun jeune n'est venu, jamais. Cela fait trois mois que je n'ai pas célébré un baptême. À la messe, je n'ai jamais réussi à dépasser cinq personnes; quatre Africains et une vieille Bretonne; je crois qu'elle avait quatre-vingt deux ans; c'était une ancienne employée des chemins de fer. Elle était veuve depuis déjà longtemps; ses enfants ne venaient plus la voir, elle n'avait plus leur adresse. Un dimanche, je ne l'ai pas vu à la messe. Je suis passé chez elle, elle habite une ZUP... Ses voisins m'ont appris qu'elle venait de se faire agresser; on l'avait transportée à l'hôpital, mais elle n'avait que des fractures légères. Je lui ai rendu visite: ses fractures mettraient du temps à se ressouder, bien sûr, mais il n'y avait aucun danger. Une semaine plus tard, quand je suis revenu, elle était morte. J'ai demandé des explications, les médecins ont refusé de m'en donner. Ils l'avaient déjà incinérée; personne de la famille ne s'était déplacé. Je suis sûr qu'elle aurait souhaité un enterrement religieux elle ne me l'avait pas dit, elle ne parlait jamais de la mort: mais je suis sûr que c'est ce qu'elle aurait souhaité (Houellebecq, 1994, pp. 160).

On the next page the reader learns that doctors at the hospital have euthanized the old woman, whom they considered to be a "charge inutile" (Houellebecq, 1994, p. 161). Interestingly, the young female nurse who administers the lethal dose of anesthetics comes to visit Buvet in confession a few days later, claiming she is unable to sleep. Patricia, who "connaissait rien aux choses de la religion" (Houellebecq, 1994, p. 162), begins to visit Jean-Pierre nearly every night, and the two develop an affectionate though chaste relationship. Buvet is tempted to break his vows, but any hope of sleeping with Patricia evaporates when she announces that she has begun seeing someone else. Buvet explains to the narrator,

Elle m'a dit qu'on ne se reverrait plus, mais qu'elle était contente de m'avoir connu ; elle aimait bien changer de garçon ; elle n'avait que vingt

ans. Au fond elle m'aimait bien, sans plus ; c'était surtout l'idée de coucher avec un prêtre qui l'excitait... (Houellebecq, 1994, p. 162)

Buvet gets drunk as he tells his story and expresses reluctance to say Mass the next morning: "Demain, il va falloir que je dise la messe. Je ne vais pas y arriver. Je ne pense pas pouvoir y arriver. Je ne sens plus la présence" (Houellebecq, 1994, p. 163). The narrator responds by asking "quelle présence" (Houellebecq, 1994, p. 163) but Buvet does not answer. The narrator calls a cab and leaves. Buvet does not reappear in the novel.

Buvet's loss of faith says more about the state of Catholicism in France than it does about the fate of religion in the West. France's peculiar relationship with the Roman Church, marked by revolution, violence, and political upheaval, has contributed to an environment in which Catholicism, long associated with social privilege and political obscurantism, no longer appeals to most contemporary French men and women. The Church's continued refusal to adopt basic elements of Western modernity (for instance, by forbidding Catholics to use condoms) does not help its chances in a country where Catholic contestation of secular political authority was a cause of division and violence for centuries. Buvet's defunct parish is not so much the result of a general decline of religion, but rather of a slackening of the social significance of an increasingly obsolete and socially irrelevant Catholicism. In *La carte et le territoire*, Houellebecq confirms his account of the plight of the priesthood in the following passage:

Héritiers d'une tradition spirituelle millénaire que plus personne ne comprenait réellement, autrefois placés au premier rang de la société, les prêtres étaient aujourd'hui réduits, à l'issue d'études effroyablement longues et difficiles qui impliquaient la maîtrise du latin, du droit canon, de la théologie rationnelle et d'autres matières presque incompréhensibles, à subsister dans des conditions matérielles misérables, ils prenaient le métro au milieu des autres hommes, allant d'un groupe de partage de

l'Évangile à un atelier d'alphabétisation, disant la messe chaque matin pour une assistance clairsemée et vieillissante, toute joie sensuelle leur était interdite, et jusqu'aux plaisirs élémentaires de la vie de famille, obligés cependant par leur fonction de manifester jour après jour un optimisme indéfectible (Houellebecq, 2010a, p. 99).

Priests in Houellebecq's novels are a dying breed whose social utility has run its course; they are historical anachronisms—anthropological curiosities whose presence on the Paris Metro is as alarming and uncanny as that of an escaped zoo animal that wanders into a restaurant. In Buvet's case, we should also keep in mind that the priest's parish lies in the suburban city of Vitry, a Parisian *banlieue* that is home to a large population of immigrant and French Muslims. The presence of a *religious alternative* in the community likely does not help matters for poor Buvet.

Unlike Houellebecq's later novels, which contain distinctly ideological statements about the decline of religion and the rise of materialism, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* is a novel that shows more than it tells. The reader is able to understand Buvet's spiritual collapse as a consequence of religious change—the decline of Catholicism in France—and his own personal experience, rather than as evidence of a general diminution of Western religiosity. The ideological bent of Houellebecq's subsequent efforts makes it more difficult, however, to produce similar readings for Bruno, Michel Djerzinski, and Daniell from *La possibilité d'une île*. While Houellebecq may still have found Catholicism compelling in the early 1990s, when he was writing *Extension*,⁶⁹ by the time

⁶⁹ There is in fact good reason to think that this is the case. In *Ennemis publics*, Houellebecq writes, "Cette année-là, je lui ai demandé [à un ami, Jean-Robert Yapoudjian]... de m'en dire un peu plus sur le christianisme. Il m'a alors offert une Bible, où il avait recopié à mon intention, sur la page de garde, un passage de l'Épître aux Corinthiens. Cette Bible, je l'ai encore... Les choses, même, sont allées plus loin, et je me revois en de curieux souvenirs flottants, proches de l'irréel, assister dans ce même lycée aux cours facultatifs d'initiation religieuse. Je me revois plus tard traîner autour du « groupe de parole chrétien » qui s'était constitué à l'Agro ; je me revois même dans un pèlerinage de Chartres... Je me revois surtout, bien des dimanches, assister à la messe, et cela pendant longtemps, dix ans, vingt ans peut-être, dans tous les domiciles parisiens où le hasard m'a conduit... Et j'ai prié, enfin prié ? à quoi ou à qui pouvais-je penser je

of his infamous *Lire* interview we are told that even “idiots” eventually realize that God does not exist.⁷⁰ In his later novels, Houellebecq appears to have confused the decline of Catholicism in France, and along with it the remarkable downward trend in church attendance and participation in religious ritual,⁷¹ with the disappearance of personal forms of conviction and piety, be they Christian or something else. He has also ignored the rise of Islam as a viable alternative to Christianity, assuming rather that it will be crushed under the weight of capitalism.⁷² Those who are interested in particular renderings of the personal and psychological ramifications of a materialist worldview will discover a great deal of fascinating material in Houellebecq’s work, but they will not find a reliable account of Europe’s religious ethos. Characters such as Bruno and Michel Djerzinski are exaggerated, somewhat lampooned victims of a worldview that Houellebecq mistakenly identifies as typical of his time, and they offer compelling portrayals of a certain kind of contemporary mentality. We might say that they are case studies in the *psychology of materialism*.⁷³ But the claim that these characters are typical

ne sais pas, mais j’ai essayé de me comporter de manière appropriée « au moment d’offrir le sacrifice de toute l’Église. » Comme j’ai aimé, profondément aimé, ce magnifique rituel, perfectionné pendant des siècles, de la messe !... Et pendant cinq à dix minutes, chaque dimanche, je croyais en Dieu ; et puis je ressortais de l’église, et tout s’évanouissait, très vite, en quelques minutes de marche dans les rues parisiennes” (Houellebecq, 2008, pp. 146-148). Additionally, in *La carte et le territoire*, the fictional Houellebecq is baptized before his death (Houellebecq, 2010a, p. 318). Houellebecq’s feelings about religion are at best ambiguous, as is revealed by this statement in a 2010 interview, “belief in the soul... is strangely persistent in me, even though I never stop saying the opposite” (Houellebecq, 2010b).

⁷⁰ “...Dieu n'existe pas, et même si on est con, on finit par s'en rendre compte” (Houellebecq, 2001b).

⁷¹ Pfaff notes that while 61.4% of French men and women believe in God or a higher power, a remarkable 67% percent say they *never* go to Church (Pfaff, 2008, pp. 30, 32).

⁷² See comments in *Lire*: (http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/michelhouellebecq_804761.html). I discuss Houellebecq’s treatment of Islam at the end of chapter three.

⁷³ It is common for materialist psychology to be conceived of along consumerist lines. For instance, Kasser’s (2002) analysis of materialist psychology criticizes the value society places on wealth and possessions but says little about more hedonistic forms of materialism, which celebrate sexual and other forms of physical pleasure to the detriment of spiritual or religious fulfillment. This narrower form of materialism, which is bound up with an exclusively economic vision of the human being, does not describe the markedly more theological kind of materialism we find in Houellebecq’s characters. Houellebecquian materialism denotes a general commitment, whether implicit or explicit, to a worldview in which all reference to transcendence has been evacuated, and in which all satisfaction to be sought is material (or

members of a crumbling West ignores the social and psychological complexities of belief nuanced by religious change (i.e., the decline of Catholicism), and moreover implies that the epistemological chasm separating science and religion is impossible to navigate even at the personal level. Readers tempted to identify Houellebecq as a social realist should consider that the sad, suicidal lives of Houellebecq's most memorable characters are more the result of the author's own atheism, not to mention his strange predilection for Auguste Comte's understanding of Western history, than they are of any true spiritual collapse in the contemporary West.

Houellebecq's presentation of religious decline in his novels and public comments does not square with the facts about religion in contemporary Europe. The author's convictions about the death of God, along with his fictional rendering of those convictions, places him in the camp of the classical secularization theorists, who predicted the outright disappearance of religion with the onset of modernity. Because Houellebecq's depiction of contemporary European religiosity lacks both psychological accuracy and empirical validity, the author's treatment of religious decline cannot be read as genuinely applicable to Western society as a whole, but only descriptive of individual psychologies in which fear of death and aging, doubt about the purpose and meaning of life, and skepticism toward the supernatural constitute prevailing and deeply entrenched characteristics. Though the origins of such psychologies are to be sought in those historical conditions that gave rise to state secularism, the decline in social significance of established churches, and the limited acceptance of materialism as a worldview, no empirical reason exists to think that these developments have made Brunos and Michels

carnal) in nature. Accordingly, while a consumerist materialist can conceivably still believe in God, spirit, etc., a Houellebecquian materialist does not.

out of the majority of contemporary Westerners, or even of the more secular French. Houellebecq's treatment of post-religious society is a meaningful yet ultimately untrustworthy fable of the horrors of materialism, which we should consider an experimental exploration of the limited, individual psychological consequences of the death of God, rather than an honest depiction of prevailing Western mentalities.

With the social significance of Christianity in seemingly terminal decline in many European countries, we do well to wonder how long de-institutionalized religious belief, of the sort we find among a majority of French men and women, will remain merely personal before coalescing into more collective forms. Religious vacuums are historical oddities, and past efforts to forcibly secularize societies have not only failed but have also been responsible for a tremendous amount of bloodletting (as have been attempts to spiritualize them). Is it possible, then, that the twenty-first century will see the rise of a new religion in the "post-Christian" West? *La possibilité d'une île* is in fact concerned with just this question. It is to this novel that we will turn in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV:

THE FUTURE OF RELIGION IN THE WEST

...Les événements politiques ou militaires, les transformations économiques, les mutations esthétiques ou culturelles peuvent jouer un rôle, parfois un très grand rôle, dans la vie des hommes; mais rien, jamais, ne peut avoir d'importance historique comparable au développement d'une nouvelle religion, ou à l'effondrement d'une religion existante. (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 363)

Up until now, I have discussed what I perceive to be some of the errors in Michel Houellebecq's thinking about materialism, religion, and their relation to contemporary Western society. On the one hand, the coherence of the author's philosophical predicates is dubious. Though he decries the materialism of modernity, Houellebecq's understanding of the term *materialism* is faulty and relies on a distinction between classical and quantum mechanics that has little, if anything, to do with the materialism/dualism debate. Furthermore, as we saw from the Eurobarometer report in chapter three, materialism is not the prevailing worldview of the contemporary West. Commitment to Christianity has declined in countries such as France, but belief in God or a higher power, spirit, or some other supernatural being is above sixty percent in France and significantly higher on average in other European countries. Unaware of statistical measures of European religiosity, and perhaps intent on generalizing his atheism, Houellebecq paints a bleaker picture of Western civilization than what we find on the ground. Besides pointing up the insightful study of the psychological consequences of materialism and atheism that Houellebecq's work provides, the previous two chapters of this dissertation should leave us wondering what the broader significance of the author's work might be. If Houellebecq is misrepresenting the facts to his readers (and perhaps to

himself as well), then what reason do we have to consider him, as some have suggested, a reputable chronicler of contemporary Western culture?⁷⁴

Several considerations indicate that we do in fact have reason to take Houellebecq seriously, regardless of the author's failure to bring intellectual rigor to his and his characters' claims about religion, materialism, and the role of science in elaborating solutions to current social dilemmas. One such consideration is that materialism and religion are not always mutually exclusive. Though Houellebecquian materialists are materialists in the full, theological sense, we can easily imagine persons who, despite their commitment to religion or spirituality, nonetheless mimic the decadent and self-destructive behavior of Bruno, Daniell, and the narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. We might consider, for instance, the consumerist frenzy that led up to the recent near-collapse of the US economy. Though the great majority of Americans claim to be religious or at least believe in God,⁷⁵ nothing about these convictions prevented them from falling prey to the exploitative practices of bankers and other financiers, who encouraged their clients to make purchases they could not afford. Coveting material objects, be they better cars or bigger homes, does not exclude the possibility of having religious beliefs: it merely conflicts with them (or at least ought to!).⁷⁶ More religious readers may still be able to take much away from Houellebecq's presentation of the

⁷⁴ See Noguez (2003), pp. 8-9.

⁷⁵ For example, a Pew Research Report in 2002 entitled "Among Wealthy Nations... U.S. Stands Alone in its Embrace of Religion," reported that 59% percent of Americans think religion is "very important," compared to just 11% in France, 30% in Canada, and 33% in Britain (see: <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/167.pdf>).

⁷⁶ It is possible to argue that obsessive consumerism may function as a kind of religious behavior, insofar as the obsessive consumer places an inordinate amount of faith in the idea that possessing material objects will make him or her happy. This conception of religion is, however, cynical, and relies on the assumption that religion is an irrational and destructive behavior. I reject this conception of religion, as I explain below.

psychological consequences of a consumerist version of materialism, even if the theological materialism of Bruno and Daniel1 is foreign to them.

A more compelling reason, however, to pay close attention to Houellebecq's critique of modern culture is that, unlike skeptics and other naysayers who either do not like religion or are unwilling to make it an object of serious study,⁷⁷ the author is willing to grant that religion not only plays an important role in personal wellbeing, but that it also has a determining effect on how a society evolves and whether it prospers. Nowhere is this intuition more prevalent than in *La Possibilité d'une île*. Houellebecq's fourth novel tells the story of the Elohimite sect, a new religious movement that emerges in Western Europe at the beginning of the twenty-first century and attracts adherents with a promise of physical immortality through cloning. In the course of the narrative, Elohimism rapidly expands to become the largest religion on the planet, and much of the church's success relies on its ability to appeal to, rather than condemn, contemporary materialism. The religion actively promotes euthanasia for the old and publicly encourages orgies and group sex; moreover, the movement denies all supernatural reality and discussion of the immortal soul, preferring to limit "transcendence" to the immortalizing of the physical body. Daniel25, the twenty-fifth in a series of clones that begins with the novel's protagonist, Daniel1, tells us,

L'élohimisme... était parfaitement adapté à la civilisation des loisirs au sein de laquelle il avait pris naissance. N'imposant aucune contrainte morale, réduisant l'existence humaine aux catégories de l'intérêt et du plaisir, il n'en reprenait pas moins à son compte la promesse fondamentale qui avait été celle de toutes les religions monothéistes: la victoire contre la mort. Éradiquant toute dimension spirituelle ou confuse, il limitait simplement la portée de cette victoire, et la nature de la promesse, à la

⁷⁷ A good example of such an enemy is Steven Pinker, whose recent hostility to teaching religion at Harvard was the subject of a 2010 article by Lisa Miller in Newsweek entitled "Harvard's Crisis of Faith". <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/02/10/harvard-s-crisis-of-faith.html>

prolongation illimitée de la vie matérielle, c'est-à-dire à la satisfaction illimitée des désires physiques (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 352).

Elohimism's unswerving commitment to materialism, as well as its denial of any sort of supernatural reality, jives easily with Houellebecq's loyalties to Comtian positivism. Religion in the Comtian view constituted *the* central facilitator of social cohesion, and under ideal conditions it needed not require any reference to supernatural entities whatsoever. The only proper object of religious worship in Comte's system was society itself, condensed in all its myriad manifestations into the *Grand-Être Société*. Insisting on the immanent, material nature of the Great Being Society, Comte writes,

...Le nouveau Grand-Être ne suppose point, comme l'ancien, une abstraction purement subjective. Sa notion résulte, au contraire, d'une exacte appréciation objective... Il n'y a, au fond, de réel que l'humanité, quoique la complication de sa nature nous ait interdit jusqu'ici d'en systématiser la nation... (Comte, 1968b, p. 334)

Houellebecq summarizes Comte's social understanding of the role of religion in

Préliminaires au positivisme:

L'homme appartient à une espèce sociale; ce fait est à la base de la pensée comtienne, et il ne faut jamais le perdre de vue si on veut avoir une chance d'entrer dans ses développements. Examinant les formations sociales de l'espèce humaine, leurs organisations diverses, leur devenir, Comte est presque exhaustif: la propriété, la famille, le système de production, l'enseignement, la science, l'art... rien n'échappe à son beau systématisme. Mais de toutes les structures produites par une société, qui en retour la fondent, la religion lui paraît à la fois la plus importante, la plus caractéristique, et la plus menacée. L'homme selon Comte peut à peu près se définir comme un animal social de type religieux (Houellebecq, 2009, p. 251).

On the other hand, positivism maintained, if only implicitly, a doctrine of rigid mind-body physicalism. Recognizing the social importance of religion, though considering traditional beliefs in immortality to be "puerile illusions" (Comte, 1968b, 9. 347), Comte attempted to elaborate a Religion of Man capable of unifying social life around reverence

for the social body and the veneration of ancestors. Nonetheless, no provision was made in Comte's system for the human desire for immortality, other than an abstract notion of eternal life in the memory of human beings:

La noble émulation excitée par la glorification continue de nos divers prédécesseurs poussera chacun à mériter aussi cette irrévocable incorporation à l'être immense et éternel qui se compose beaucoup plus de morts que de vivants... La nouvelle éducation générale aura bientôt disposé tous les positivistes à sentir, dans une telle récompense de toute conduite honorable, un plein équivalent des vaines espérances qui animaient leurs précurseurs (Comte, 1968b, p. 346)

In other words, in the positivist view, satisfaction with having participated in the flourishing of society and honored its members was to be adequate compensation for the eternal life promised by Christianity, a doctrine which Comte identified (falsely, as I suggest in chapter three) as nearing extinction.

Houellebecq shares Comte's allegiance to mind-body physicalism, but he is rightly skeptical that a religion without reference to the supernatural—specifically, without the notion of an *immortal soul*—will ever be taken seriously. He writes,

Comte avait bien compris que la religion... avait pour mission de relier les hommes et de régler leurs actes; il avait prévu les sacrements, le calendrier. Il n'avait peut-être pas saisi la profondeur du désir d'immortalité inscrit en l'homme... L'immortalité abstraite inscrite dans la mémoire humaine a quoi qu'il en soit échoué à convaincre les individus de son temps—sans parler du nôtre—, affamés d'une promesse de survie plus matérielle. Supposons en effet réalisés les prérequis du système de Comte—ce qui demandera, peut-être, quelques siècles. Supposons les théismes éteints, le matérialisme dévalué, le positivisme établi comme seule pensée opérante de l'âge scientifique.

Supposons en outre le caractère 'irremplaçable et unique' de l'individu humain reconnu comme une fiction pompière... Supposons que tout cela ne soit plus l'objet de polémiques ni d'affrontements... En quoi aurons-nous avancé, si peu que ce soit, dans l'établissement d'une religion commune ? En quoi la pensée de l'humanité, ou du Grand-Être, sera-t-elle plus désirable aux individus? Et qu'est-ce qui pourra les amener, conscients de leur disparition individuelle, à se satisfaire de leur

participation à ce théorique fétiche? Qui peut, enfin, s'intéresser à une religion qui ne garantit pas de la mort (Houellebecq, 2009, pp. 251-252)?

Elohimism proposes a solution to the inadequacies of Comte's Religion of Man, even as it upholds the basic tenets of the positivist view of religion. As I will discuss below, in *La possibilité d'une île* Elohimism not only unites its followers around a common hope for immortality, embellished by rituals and practices dedicated to affirming that hope, but, even more importantly, is able to promise its members immortality where Comte's Religion of Man could not—though in this case without reference to an immortal soul. Through cloning, the immortality once thought to be the exclusive domain of immaterial transcendence can now be realized technologically: not only does the Elohimite Church store its followers' DNA, but it also pledges to transmit their memories to future clones by means of some sort of “molecular transfer.”⁷⁸ Religion becomes possible when achieving immortality becomes a matter of scientific innovation:

L'établissement de l'immortalité physique, par des moyens qui appartiennent à la technologie, est sans doute le passage obligé qui rendra, à nouveau, une religion possible (Houellebecq, 2009, p. 253).

The positivist system of religion and the cult of the Great Being are only realizable so long as some promise of personal immortality can be included in the package. Elohimism is able to proffer such spiritual goods—though one naturally wonders what Comte, who claimed that living for others constituted the supreme form of happiness,⁷⁹ would have thought about its unrestrained hedonism.

⁷⁸ “Les trois lois de Pierce allaient mettre fin aux tentatives hasardeuses de downloading mémoriel par l'intermédiaire d'un support informatique au profit d'une part du transfert moléculaire direct, d'autre part de ce que nous connaissons aujourd'hui sous le nom de récit de vie” (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 27). To be sure, how this direct molecular transfer differs from memory downloading is left to the reader's imagination.

⁷⁹ “Vivre pour autrui devient ainsi le Bonheur suprême. S'incorporer intimement à l'Humanité, sympathiser avec toutes les vicissitudes antérieures, et pressentir ses destinées futures, en concourant activement à les préparer, constituera le but familial de chaque existence » (Comte, 1968b, p. 353).

Houellebecq's discussion of Elohimism naturally evokes questions about the definition of religion that go back to the very beginnings of sociology. In the classical Durkheimian view, religion's two functions were to unite the social body and to explain the nature of reality; worship of and belief in supernatural entities was incidental to the worship of society, and thus it was possible to consider a wide variety of social movements as religious in form, even if they did not have supernatural references (Durkheim, 1994, p. 156). Since Durkheim, and despite immense attempts on the part of sociologists to define religion, the question "what is religion" remains notoriously hard to answer. Rodney Stark, whom I discussed in chapter three, is perhaps the strongest opponent of the Durkheimian view, arguing, as we saw, that religion's essence lies in belief in the supernatural (Stark, 2004). Other perhaps less polemical attempts to define religion abandon the notion of essence, proposing instead a series of dimensions or common characteristics that religions typically possess. For instance, anthropologist Jonathan Benthall argues for a nineteen point system including such traits as "solace in the face of suffering and death," "appeal to supernatural entities," and "moral imperatives based on altruism" (Benthall, 2009, pp. 22, 40, 44). Environmental scholar Bron Taylor suggests sixteen (Taylor, 2007, pp. 15-17), while Ninian Smart in the highly influential book *Dimensions of the Sacred* (1996) discusses seven. Other such enumerations exist, but for my purposes in this chapter—and since I am wary of entering into a quarrel over definitions from which there seems to be no clear exit—in later remarks I will simplify by focusing my comments on the debate between definitions of religion that include reference to the supernatural as a necessary characteristic, and those that do not—that is, the views of Stark and Durkheim, respectively. Thus, in the case of Elohimism, we can

ask if it is legitimate to count as a religion a system of belief and practice that denies supernatural reality, or conversely whether the movement's ability to unite society around a set of beliefs, however materialistic and worldly in nature, is not enough to warrant the designation of religion. For his part, Houellebecq wonders how religion could have any appeal without a promise of immortality; and thus on the same token his reader may wonder how a religion can be called a religion when it makes no reference whatsoever to gods and souls, and moreover promotes behavior that seems grossly immoral, as in the case of Elohimism. As I will show, the Elohimite cult of *Possibilité* will appear as a religion on Durkheimian criteria, though less and in some cases not at all on those of definitions or systemizations of religion that include belief in supernatural entities.

Although Elohimism's status as a religion is debatable, Houellebecq's evocation of this new religious movement represents a serious and compelling exploration of the future of religiosity in Western societies. There is nothing fundamentally inconceivable about the idea that some new religious movement, cloning cult or otherwise, may begin to attract *en masse* many of those Westerners whose personal beliefs have not yet found, or have been deprived of, an institutional context. Mormonism in the United States, for example, began somewhat implausibly and under very difficult circumstances, yet its members today are legion. Cloning cults may not be the answer for Europe (assuming for the moment that Europe requires an answer), but the prospects for religious change in a society where institutional Christianity has declined drastically in social importance are a fascinating subject of inquiry or, in Houellebecq's case, of speculation. *La Possibilité d'une île* may be prophetic at best, but the novel nonetheless presents a thought-provoking vision of Western civilization's religious future.

My aim in this chapter is both to assess the claims to religiosity of Elohimism and, more importantly, to address the social and spiritual concerns that would prod an author such as Houellebecq to imagine a Europe in which a cultist movement becomes the religious norm. Is Houellebecq merely reacting to a problematic religious vacuum, or is he rather worried that more pernicious forms of religious expression may begin to fill the space vacated by the retreat of Christianity? In order to pursue this analysis, however, I must first address the political and social conditions that lead us to think that religion in Europe may in fact be on the verge of an evolutionary next step. What collective forms might individual religious belief among Europeans eventually take? Or will spiritual conviction remain by and large private and deinstitutionalized? In the following section, I will discuss these questions in connection with the work of one of France's foremost political philosophers of religion—Marcel Gauchet.

Religion, Secularism, and The French Crisis of Worldviews

The history of modern France is in many respects a history of religion and the state. During the end of the eighteenth century and throughout most of the nineteenth century, France witnessed a violent tug-of-war between secular, republican regimes and their monarchical and pro-Catholic counterparts. Events such as the Paris Commune, during which communards murdered priests, brought to light the hateful divisions between those who favored secular ideologies and those who saw religion and the Church as vital components of French national and political identity. The arrival of the Third Republic after the Prussian defeat would—at least institutionally speaking—put an end to the conflict, while the passing of the Ferry laws would ensure that a sense of secular,

republican self-understanding was instilled in French schoolchildren. However, French Catholic identity would remain deeply entrenched in great swaths of the population, resurfacing during moments of national crisis (for example, the virulent anti-Semitism of some Catholics during the Dreyfus affair, though also the efforts of French Catholics to shelter Jews during the Nazi occupation). Indeed, it was not until 1905 that Church and State were finally separated, and in outlying regions such as Brittany, Catholicism did not begin to decline until well into the second half of the twentieth century.⁸⁰ The violence that marked the struggles between secular, republican regimes and their monarchical counterparts thus had a lasting impact on French attitudes toward religion, which continues to this day. The recent banning of headscarves in public schools demonstrates the degree to which French men and women remain fearful of the potentially deleterious consequences of the public expression of religion. John R. Bowen writes,

The legacy of combat against the Church in the name of the Republic has been handed down through civic instruction, popular media, and teacher-training courses. The legacy helps to explain the degree to which many teachers and intellectuals see the contemporary presence of Islam in the schools as threatening to turn back the clock on at least two struggles: the fight to keep religion from controlling young minds, and the struggle to forge a common French identity (Bowen, 2007, p. 25).

The battle between Church and State to define the values and identity of France has played a determining role in how the modern French republic understands itself and its relation to non-secular powers. Marcel Gauchet argues that France's current political and cultural identity must be understood as the product of this fundamental historical development, which ended in the twentieth century with the triumph of secularism over religious authority. Crucially, Gauchet claims that it was the imposition of the Church's

⁸⁰ For a discussion of the decline of Catholicism in Brittany, see Georges Minois, *Nouvelle histoire de la Bretagne*, Paris, Fayard, 1992, pp. 814-818.

political will on the self-determination of secular institutions that served to consolidate and clarify the democratic principle at the heart of French republicanism. He writes,

La séparation de l'Église et de l'État, de la religion et de la politique a fourni le ressort d'une magnification de la politique. La confrontation avec le parti de l'obéissance sacrale a extraordinairement grandi le combat de la liberté. Elle a déterminé une entente transcendante du régime grâce auquel les hommes se donnent leurs propres lois. Cette transfiguration de la souveraineté, dont les racines plongent loin dans le passé, aura sans doute été l'originalité de ce pays sur la longue durée. C'est elle qui l'a constitué en laboratoire de l'invention démocratique (Gauchet, 1998, p. 8).

Gauchet refers to France's slow disentangling of secular from ecclesiastical power as the "sortie de la religion." Understood as a reconfiguration of how French men and women understood their relationship to cultural and political authority, the "exit from religion" has transformed Catholicism in France from a structuring institution—that is, an institution that organized human social existence at the most basic levels—into a matter of choice, particular vocation, and personal preference:

Sortie de la religion ne signifie pas sortie de la croyance religieuse, mais sortie d'un monde où la religion est structurante, où elle commande la forme politique des sociétés et où elle définit l'économie du lien social (Gauchet, 1998, p. 11).

But, Gauchet asks, if modern French political and cultural identity has emerged as a product of conflict between Church and State, what is the status of that identity now that the structuring power of religion—at both the political and the social levels—has disappeared? In Gauchet's view, it is precisely the antagonism between secular and divine authority that maintained the vigor and relevance of republican self-understanding. While in the past, radical hostility to religion and the desire to formulate a terrestrial alternative for salvation (such as one finds in Marxism, for example) fueled the elaboration of secular institutions (Gauchet, 1998, p. 59), in our time secularism's

triumph over the heteronymous power of religion has only trivialized the former (Gauchet, 1998, p. 75). France finds itself in a situation in which “Nous sommes en train d’apprendre la politique de l’homme sans le ciel—ni avec le ciel, ni à la place du ciel, ni contre le ciel” (Gauchet, 1998, p. 65). Because religious authority has been eradicated from French political life and cannot impose moral and ritual obligations on French citizens, republicanism is no longer able to define itself in essence as a secular alternative.

Gauchet’s analysis might seem obvious but for one thing: while even the most pedestrian observer can see that religion has no political clout in the modern French state, the weakening of religious authority *has also weakened faith in the secular ideals of republicanism*:

Il n’est pas exagéré de dire, je crois, que l’ensemble des sources et des références qui ont permis de donner corps, singulièrement en France, à l’alternative laïque contre les prétentions de l’Église sont elles aussi frappées de décroissance (Gauchet, 1998, p. 30).

Without a clear antagonist, secularism cannot serve as a reliable foundation for French cultural and political self-understanding. The spring from which flowed republican identity—and with it a coherent commitment to laical ideology—has run dry:

L’idée de la République sur l’acquis coutumier de laquelle nous continuons de vivre a perdu son âme avec l’idée de la laïcité qui la flanquait comme sa plus intime compagne. La source de sens à laquelle elles s’alimentaient s’est tarie. Les termes du rapport entre religion et politique en fonction desquels elles s’étaient définies se sont radicalement déplacés (Gauchet, 1998, p. 63).

With the dangers of monarchy and empire having long ago vanished, and with no clear sense of a religious threat to political authority, state secularism has moved from an era of contestation to preserving the status quo. However, without the need to challenge the

impositions of divine authority, the power of secularism to define the French sense of self has begun to wither. France's persistent allergy to forms of religious expression that do not uphold the values of the secular republic (the so-called "sects"),⁸¹ coupled with a confused sense among French men and women of the target of secular ideals, thus opens up an empty ideological space at the heart of French identity, where neither the private nor the political and social spheres can step in to supply satisfactory answers to traditionally religious questions of ultimate purpose:

La politique ne peut plus prétendre à la globalité qu'elle devait à l'ambition d'offrir une alternative à l'hétéronomie; elle ne peut plus se présenter comme une réponse en elle-même à la question du sens de l'existence à l'échelle collective. Il ne saurait y avoir de réponse collective à cette question ; elle n'admet que des réponses individuelles... D'un côté, la puissance publique est plus que jamais vouée à la neutralité; il est exclu par définition que s'incarne en elle quelque notion du bien ultime que ce soit. De l'autre côté, elle a besoin de référence à des fins qui ne peuvent venir que du dehors d'elle, et qui doivent demeurer à l'extérieur de son périmètre, tout en étant suffisamment intégrées dans la sphère officielle pour la sustenter. Elle ne peut en être coupée: elle ne peut pas en participer (1998, p. 104).

Gauchet does not suggest that France relinquish its commitment to laical ideology in a behind-the-back effort to re-sow the seeds of secular contestation. Indeed, the French government's recent banning of the burka indicates an ongoing commitment to uphold the values of state secularism. Yet, without a concrete sense of the purpose of those values, and taking into account the failure of twentieth-century mass ideological and revolutionary movements (Marxism, Communism, Maoism, etc.) to bring about "heaven on earth," one wonders about the reasonableness of France's unwillingness to loosen its grip on religious expression, especially when secular opposition no longer

⁸¹ "The 'community niche' is classic in the US, but it is seen with suspicion in France because of France's republican tradition which is hostile to intermediary communities. These niches are considered religious vectors of social control and a potential threat to what is expected today of religious correctness: diversity, tolerance, and openness" (Fath, 2005, p. 408).

produces the sort of ideological thrill, or indeed quasi-religious fervor, that can ground a sense of individual or collective identity.⁸²

Gauchet's analysis leads us to the surprising conclusion that *laïcité* may have simply run its course in France, and that the government's sputtering attempts to assert laical ideology—by banning the veil, for instance—are last-ditch efforts to preserve a cultural and political identity that has lost its significance. The French state puts pressure on its citizens to keep religion a strictly private affair: in reality, religion has *never* been a strictly private affair, but has always—trivially—been a source of social unity and collective identity.⁸³ When Gauchet writes, “Il est demandé à ces croyances et adhésions de se faire pourvoyeuse de sens de la vie collective en demeurant de l'ordre de l'option individuelle” (Gauchet, 1998, p. 78), he points to France's refusal to accept what religion in large part just *is*—an institution as social as it is personal, which does not survive when it can no longer be expressed publicly, and whose persistent absence can, at least on Houellebecq's account, ultimately destroy a society.⁸⁴

And we know from statistical surveys that France,⁸⁵ however indifferent its inhabitants may be to Catholicism, remains in majority a religious or at the very least “spiritual” country. If, as Gauchet suggests, *laïcité* fails to inspire a coherent worldview in French citizens, this is because it has lost its essential reference—the contestation of

⁸² “...L'hostilité radicale à la religion, la volonté de la supplanter complètement et définitivement conduisent en fait à se modeler sur elle ; la perspective de salut est transportée dans les temps terrestres ; le projet d'autonomie devient prétention d'accoucher l'histoire de son aboutissement, sous les traits d'une société pleinement maîtresse d'elle-même : la théocratie renaît comme idéocratie” (Gauchet, 1998, p. 59).

⁸³ The same can be said of regional affiliations (such as in Brittany) that have historically been suffocated by political and cultural centralization and civic obligation toward *la patrie*.

⁸⁴ It is curious to note in this respect that two of France's most important and influential intellectuals—Auguste Comte and Émile Durkheim—not only identified religion as a fundamental element of social order and unity, but also argued that religion was *exclusively* social in nature and served only to unite men and women around the concept of a sacred social body.

⁸⁵ Once again, I am speaking of traditionally white, Catholic France, not of its religious minorities.

religious authority, and with it the zeal and commitment associated with those utopian movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from the Paris Commune to the Cambodian Revolution, that stood out as secular and often atheist alternatives for social and political organization. In France we thus find high levels of belief hobbled by a sense of cultural identity that prohibits its outward expression, and a political ideology that expects responses to questions of ultimate meaning to be only personal in nature.⁸⁶ In this respect, we may legitimately speak of a *crisis of worldviews* in France, linked to a blurred conception of French identity in a world whose dominant cultural model is not *laïcité* but Anglo-American multiculturalism.⁸⁷ Considering the hegemonic pressure that American ideological and cultural standards place on French identity, as well as the confused notion of the psychological and social value of religion common among the citizens of the *république laïque*, might it not be fair to suggest that many French, consciously or not, occupy an ideological and existential void?⁸⁸

⁸⁶ “Tout ce qui relève de l’explication ultime, de la prise de position sur le sens de l’aventure humaine se trouve renvoyé du côté des individus—le collectif ne représentant plus, comme il le représentait tout le temps qu’il était supposé ouvrir la porte de l’autonomie, un enjeu métaphysique suffisant en elle-même... Seules les consciences singulières sont habilitées à se prononcer sur les matières de dernier ressort, y compris à propos de l’autonomie, y compris à propos de l’existence en commun” (Gauchet, 1998, pp. 76-77).

⁸⁷ “In France, *laïcité* is an exacerbated, politicized, and ideological form of Western secularism... *Laïcité*... defines national cohesion by asserting a purely political identity that confines to the private sphere any specific religious or cultural tendencies. Outside France, this very offensive and militant *laïcité* is perceived as excessive, and even undemocratic, since it violates individual freedom. It is regularly denounced in the annual report of the State Department on religious freedom in the world (not only because of the prohibition of the Muslim veil but also because of the restrictions placed on the activities of sects such as Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Scientologists)” (Roy, 2007, xiii).

⁸⁸ Interesting to note in regard to the question of French identity is a November 2007 issue of *Time* Magazine, whose cover featured a frowning mime beneath the heading “The Death of French Culture.” The author of the lead article, Donald Morrison, argued that the insularity of France’s literary culture, and especially its tendency to indulge in quaint “psychologisms” rather than deal with broader social issues, is the principal reason so few of the novels published during each *rentrée littéraire* are ever translated into English or other languages. Morrison suggests that France’s immigrant population may hold the key to reviving global interest in French literature and other art forms, since the representation of social struggle inherent to the immigrant experience appeals to the multicultural esthetic of the dominant Anglo-American cultural model. Morrison’s article caused enough of a stir among the identity-anxious French that he wrote

Whatever the answer to this provocative question may be, Michel Houellebecq already has his own ideas. France's first great pessimist of the twenty-first century is writing at a time when the utopian dreams of Marxism and other mass atheist ideologies have met with failure. In Houellebecq's novels, we are a long way from Camus' *homme révolté* or the politically engaged existentialism of Sartre's *Les mains sales*; rather, we find ourselves neck deep in the divisive superficialities of American consumerism and a rampant atheism that no longer has anything revolutionary, joyful, or purposeful about it. Houellebecq's novels are, in an important sense, tales of the failure of atheism, and with it the revolt against divine and non-secular authority, to make the world any happier than it was before—and this despite the willingness of so many French to embrace the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century. Houellebecq asks: Religion? Why not? With revolution no longer desirable,⁸⁹ Marxism discredited, and capitalism showing signs of wear, why not take a look again at religion? *La possibilité d'une île* in fact does just that.

The Return of Religion?

La possibilité d'une île is perhaps Houellebecq's most wide-ranging and philosophically complex novel. It is only in this text that the author's criticism of

and published a book-length work on the same subject, *Que reste-t-il de la culture française?* which appeared in 2008.

⁸⁹ In *Left in Dark Times*, Bernard-Henri Lévy writes, "Since the French Revolution, the word 'revolution,' the pure signifier, was, in France at least, the most serious political dividing line. The Left wanted it; the Right feared it. The Left, even and especially if they hated its provisional guises, kept alive the dream of society in a happier incarnation and thought that this was exactly what made one a Leftist—the Right was made up of those people whose political outlook meant methodically putting down each and every revolution. That time, too, is past... We have entered a period in which, as Michel Foucault once told me, the question 'Is the revolution possible?' has given way to a more troubling and much more radical question: 'Is the revolution desirable?' And now, especially, the answer has become 'No,' a clear 'No,' not desirable at all, or, in any case, only for very few people. Who in the contemporary political landscape still openly dreams of wiping the slate clean? of a radical new beginning? of history split in two? of society as a blank page upon which the poem of the New Man will be inscribed? Europe has ended up aligning itself, in this matter, with realism, pragmatism, and, finally, American humility—and that is excellent news" (Lévy, 2008, p. 7).

materialist culture, and along with it the West's principal humanist alternatives to Christian civilization, socialism and liberalism, culminates in the sustained exploration of a religious solution to human suffering. While the *discours* of *Les particules élémentaires* are aimed more explicitly at addressing the cultural and psychological consequences of theological materialism, Houellebecq's critique of modernity in novels such as *Plateforme* also finds forms of political expression, which prepare the way for his treatment of religion in *Possibilité*. The monologue of the disgruntled Cuban revolutionary in *Plateforme* is one such instance:

Nous avons échoué... et nous avons mérité notre échec. Nous avons des dirigeants de grande valeur, des hommes exceptionnels, idéalistes, qui faisaient passer le bien de la patrie avant leur intérêt propre. Je me souviens du *commandante* Che Guevara le jour où il est venu inaugurer l'usine de traitement de cacao dans notre ville ; je revois son visage courageux, honnête. Personne n'a jamais pu dire que le *commandante* s'était enrichi, qu'il avait cherché à obtenir des avantages pour lui ni pour sa famille... Il a prononcé un discours où il exhortait le peuple cubain à gagner la bataille pacifique de la production, après la lutte armée du combat de l'indépendance... Nous pouvions parfaitement gagner cette bataille. C'est une région très fertile ici, la terre est riche et bien arrosée, tout pousse à volonté: café, cacao, canne à sucre, fruits exotiques de toutes espèces. Le sous-sol est saturé de minerai de nickel. Nous avons une usine ultramoderne, construite avec l'aide des Russes. Au bout de six mois, la production était tombée à la moitié de son chiffre normal : tous les ouvriers volaient du chocolat... le distribuaient à leur famille, le revendaient à des étrangers. Et cela a été la même chose dans toutes les usines, à l'échelle du pays entier. Quand ils ne trouvaient rien à voler les ouvriers travaillaient mal, ils étaient paresseux, toujours malade, ils s'absentaient sans la moindre raison. J'ai passé des années à essayer de leur parler, de les convaincre de se donner un peu plus de mal dans l'intérêt de leur pays: je n'ai connu que la déception et la honte" (Houellebecq, 2001a, pp. 230-231).

The Cuban worker's comments are not so much a condemnation of communism on Houellebecq's part (for certainly Houellebecq is no fan of liberalism) as they are an expression of loss of faith in the prospects of utopia. The Cuban's soliloquy provides an

instance of a familiar Houellebecquian trope: the sense that all modern efforts to fill the vacuum left by the disappearance of religion, be they liberal or socialist, have been disappointments. Houellebecq suggests that any effort to define man as an economic rather than theological being poses a grave risk to human welfare: in the Houellebecquian universe, all attempts to predicate mankind's happiness on uniquely material conditions have ended in sorrow, bitterness, and shame. The case of Rudi, the depressed and lonely Belgian police officer in *Lanzarote* whose life is destroyed when his wife kidnaps his children and flees to Morocco, is exemplary of this attitude toward secular modernity. Rudi, who by novella's end has decided to join the Azraelian Church, a New Age cult similar to Elohimism, writes in a letter to the story's narrator,

Je sais que, pour les Occidentaux, l'adhésion à une 'secte,' avec la renonciation à une certaine forme de liberté individuelle qu'elle implique, est toujours interprétée comme un dramatique échec personnel...

Que pouvons-nous espérer de la vie ?

...La réponse apportée par la religion azraélienne est d'une nouveauté radicale puisqu'elle propose à chacun, dès maintenant et sur cette terre, de bénéficier de l'immortalité physique. En pratique, un prélèvement de peau est effectué sur chaque nouvel adhérent ; ce prélèvement est conservé à très basse température. Des contacts sont régulièrement maintenus avec les sociétés de biotechnologie les plus avancées dans le domaine du clonage humain. De l'avis des meilleurs spécialistes, la réalisation pratique du projet n'est plus qu'une question d'années.

...Azraël propose l'immortalité des pensées et des souvenirs—par transfert du contenu mémoriel sur un support intermédiaire, avant réinjection dans le cerveau du nouveau clone. Cette proposition, il est vrai, relève d'avantage de la science-fiction, dans la mesure où on n'a pour l'instant aucune idée des bases techniques de sa mise en œuvre.

...Il paraît étrange de qualifier de 'secte' une organisation qui apporte des réponses aussi novatrices et techniques à un ensemble de problèmes traités par les religions conventionnelles de manière beaucoup plus irrationnelle et métaphorique. Le point faible de la doctrine réside évidemment dans l'existence des *Anakim*, ces extraterrestres qui auraient créé la vie sur Terre voici plusieurs centaines de millions d'années. Mais, outre qu'une telle hypothèse n'a rien d'absurde, on peut observer que, pour une raison ou une autre, les communautés humaines ont toujours eu

le plus grand mal à s'organiser sans la référence à un principe supérieur (Houellebecq, 2000a, pp. 70-71).

What freedoms does Rudi forsake by joining the Azraelian Church? Adherence to a religion (be it to a “sect,” in the French sense, or to a Church) always involves some degree of personal forfeiture. Dietary and sexual restrictions, limitations on social interaction outside the Church, and sometimes even an obligation to cut ties with unsupportive family members may be, and indeed have been, sacrifices associated with belonging to a religious community. What Houellebecq chooses to emphasize, however, and what most upsets the novel’s narrator, is that Rudi will be required to relinquish his worldly belongings to the Azraelians, specifically the proceeds of the sale of his house: “Ainsi, ils allaient réussir à détourner l’argent de la vente de sa maison. Toute une vie d’économie et d’emprunts, et puis ça” (Houellebecq, 2000a, p. 73). The downside of Rudi’s conversion is not spiritual but economic, for it will result in a loss of private property. Differing in tone from official Republican ideology, which identifies sects as dangerous to the psychological health of their adherents, the narrator suggests that the true source of suspicion toward “new religious movements”⁹⁰ among secular Europeans is that they forbid their members the materialistic freedoms, both carnal and proprietary, that one enjoys while living in a liberal democracy. Having done ample work demonstrating the vanity of those freedoms in his previous novels, Houellebecq is therefore able in *La possibilité d’une île*—for which *Lanzarote* provides the thematic

⁹⁰ The case of Scientology in France is exemplary of this attitude. In October 2009, the Church and six of its members were convicted of fraud for encouraging the plaintiffs in the case to buy vitamins and books after undergoing examination with the Church’s “E-meter” (see: <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/europe/10/27/france.scientology.fraud/index.html>). The religion was not banned, though the French government continues to classify it as a dangerous sect.

primer—to entertain seriously religious responses to an economic and materialistic conception of mankind that is unable to sustain human happiness.

La possibilité d'une île is the story of two parallel historical developments in twenty-first century Western civilization: the triumph of the cult of youth as a nexus of moral, political, and economic consensus, and the birth of a new religion, Elohimism, that panders to the prevailing materialism of the age. Caught up in the sweep of these transformations is Daniel, the novel's narrator, a sex-obsessed and aging comedian who has made a fortune thanks to his outrageously offensive sense of humor and calculated indifference to taboo. The aesthetic values of Daniel's time are utterly debauched. The comedian's most successful sketch, "On préfère les partouzeuses palestiniennes" (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 45), achieves critical renown in an artistic environment where morality has been "mise à mort" (2005a, p. 49), and where "toute forme de cruauté, d'égoïsme cynique ou de violence était... la bienvenue—certains sujets, comme le parricide ou le cannibalisme, bénéficiant d'un petit *plus*" (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 50).

Early in the narrative, Daniel meets Isabelle, a beautiful woman in her mid-thirties who, like Daniel, has become rich by exploiting Western civilization's crumbling moral and religious foundations. The editor of a popular teen magazine, Isabelle witnesses first hand the frenzy with which women thirty and older have begun to venerate the nubile flesh of adolescent girls:

Notre cible commence à dix ans... mais il n'y a pas de limite supérieure."
...De plus en plus, les mères tendraient à copier leurs filles. Il y a évidemment un certain ridicule pour une femme de trente ans à acheter un magazine appelé *Lolita*; mais pas davantage qu'un top moultant, ou un mini-short... Le sentiment du ridicule, qui avait été si vif chez les femmes, en particulier chez les femmes françaises, allait peu à peu disparaître au profit de la fascination pure pour une jeunesse sans limites (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 41).

Isabelle recognizes the insanity of her clientele, but she remains as obsessed as her magazine's readers with warding off the physical effects of aging. She and Daniel marry and live happily in southern Spain for a number of years, but as Isabelle nears forty, she begins to despair at the sight of her body:

Parfois... lorsque nous nous préparions pour aller à la plage et qu'elle enfilait son maillot de bain—je la sentais, au moment où mon regard se posait sur elle, s'affaisser légèrement, comme si elle avait reçu un coup de poing dans les omoplates. Une grimace de douleur vite réprimée déformait ses traits magnifiques... son corps, malgré la natation, malgré la danse classique, commençait à subir les premières atteintes de l'âge—atteintes qui, elle ne le savait que trop bien, allaient rapidement s'amplifier jusqu'à la dégradation totale... Je connaissais le regard qu'elle avait ensuite: c'était celui, humble et triste, de l'animal malade, qui s'écarte de quelques pas de la meute, qui pose sa tête sur ses pattes et qui soupire doucement, parce qu'il se sent atteint et qu'il sait qu'il n'aura, de la part de ses congénères, à attendre aucune pitié (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 53).

Daniel does not love Isabelle any less for the decline of her beauty. In lieu of making love, the two adopt a dog, Fox, who brings them joy despite the gnawing lack of tenderness between them. Things do not improve, however, and while Daniel is away on business Isabelle goes on a physically catastrophic drinking binge. Afterward, disgusted by her body and unable to feel love, Isabelle leaves Daniel and returns to France: "Elle ne parvenait plus à se supporter; et, partant, elle ne supportait plus l'amour, qui lui paraissait faux" (Houellebecq, 2005a, pp. 71-72). Faced with Isabelle's decline and her departure, Daniel remarks,

La disparition de la tendresse suit toujours de près celle de l'érotisme. Il n'y a pas de relation épurée, d'union supérieure des âmes, ni quoi que ce soit qui puisse y ressembler... Quand l'amour physique disparaît, tout disparaît; un agacement morne, sans profondeur, vient remplir la succession des jours. Et, sur l'amour physique, je ne me faisais guère d'illusion. Jeunesse, beauté, force: les critères de l'amour physique sont exactement les mêmes que ceux du nazisme (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 72).

Daniel, however, is not done with love—or at least he is not done with sex. Soon after Isabelle’s departure, he meets the beautiful 20-year-old Esther, a Spanish actress with whom he begins a wild, desperate, and ultimately destructive affair. At 47, Daniel is terrified that Esther will abandon him for a younger man: he spends what time he can with her in Madrid, but back home at his residence in Andalusia he waits frantically for Esther to return his phone calls. The affair drags on, and though Daniel admits experiencing moments of intense happiness with her (though happiness of a mostly sexual nature), he knows deep down that this relationship, which is bound to end when Esther finds someone her age, is going to be his undoing:

...L’amour rend faible, et le plus faible des deux est opprimé, torturé et finalement tué par l’autre, qui de son côté opprime, torture et tue sans penser à mal, sans même en éprouver de plaisir, avec une complète indifférence; voilà ce que les hommes, ordinairement, appellent l’amour (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 184).

Esther is a frivolous creature, well suited to the materialistic, hedonistic twenty-first-century European environment of *Possibilité*. She refuses to kiss Daniel: like all the young people of her generation, she does not have a great interest in love, while she certainly has a tremendous penchant for sex.⁹¹ Esther is eventually offered a job in New York and leaves Spain shortly after a party for her twenty-first birthday, during which Daniel finds her sleeping with two younger men:

...Je me rendis compte que ça faisait longtemps que je n’avais pas vu Esther, et je partis plus ou moins à sa recherche... Je finis par la découvrir dans l’une des chambres du fond, allongée au milieu d’un groupe; elle n’avait plus que sa mini-jupe dorée, retroussée jusqu’à la taille. Un garçon

⁹¹ “Ce sentiment d’attachement exclusif que je sentais en moi, qui allait me torturer de plus en plus jusqu’à m’anéantir, ne correspondait absolument à rien pour elle, n’avait aucune justification, aucune raison d’être : nos chairs étaient distinctes, nous ne pouvions ressentir ni les mêmes souffrances ni les mêmes joies, nous étions de toute évidence des êtres séparés. Isabelle n’aimait pas la jouissance, mais Esther n’aimait pas l’amour, elle *ne voulait pas* être amoureuse, elle refusait ce sentiment d’exclusivité, de dépendance, et c’est toute sa génération qui le refusait avec elle” (Houellebecq, 2005, p. 333).

allongé derrière elle, un grand brun aux cheveux longs frisés... lui caressait les fesses et s'apprêtait à la pénétrer. Elle parlait à un autre garçon, brun lui aussi, très musclé... en même temps elle jouait avec son sexe... je l'ignorais encore, mais ce serait la dernière image que je garderais d'elle (2005, p. 335).

Abandoned by his capricious lover, Daniel tends slowly toward suicide, declaring “toute énergie est d'ordre sexuel, non pas principalement mais exclusivement, et lorsque l'animal n'est plus bon à se reproduire il n'est absolument plus bon à rien” (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 217). Daniel is a man whose principal concern in life has been with being able to get and maintain an erection; he has never made any real distinction between happiness and sex; and his sense of purpose outside of his carnal predilections is utterly absent.⁹² Terrified by physical aging, decline, and the prospect of abandonment, while at the same time unable to console himself with even the vaguest notion of ultimate purpose (“Mon athéisme était si monumental, si radical que je n'avais même jamais réussi à prendre ces sujets [l'esprit et l'âme] au sérieux” (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 252).), Daniel is one more casualty in Houellebecq's catalogue of the victims of materialism. His suicide comes as no surprise.

During the course of this appalling commentary on the fate of the old—or more precisely the not-young—in a culture where youth has become the ultimate and unquestionable good, we encounter the Elohimites, a group of New Age practitioners who believe life was brought to earth by extraterrestrials, and who place their hopes for immortality in the prospect of cloning. Elohimism is well adapted to the prevailing materialism of the day: basing its entire appeal on the promise of physical immortality,

⁹² “J'avais probablement accordé trop d'importance à la sexualité, c'était indiscutable ; mais le seul endroit au monde où je m'étais senti bien c'était blotti dans les bras d'une femme, blotti au fond de son vagin ; et, à mon âge, je ne voyais aucune raison que ça change. L'existence de la chatte était déjà en soi une bénédiction, me disais-je, le simple fait que je puisse y être, et m'y sentir bien, constituait déjà une raison suffisante pour prolonger ce pénible périple” (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 107).

the cult offers its members an eternity of health and pleasure, free from any confusing spiritual or metaphysical considerations:

De plus en plus les hommes allaient vouloir vivre dans la liberté, dans l'irresponsabilité, dans la quête éperdue de la jouissance; ils allaient vouloir vivre comme vivaient déjà, au milieu d'eux, les *kids*, et lorsque l'âge ferait décidément sentir son poids, lorsqu'il leur serait devenu impossible de soutenir la lutte, ils mettraient fin; mais ils auraient entre-temps adhéré à l'Église élohimate, leur code génétique aurait été sauvegardé, et ils mourraient dans l'espoir d'une continuation indéfinie de cette même existence vouée aux plaisirs (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 410).

Elohimites are to live as perpetual Esthers, pursuing physical gratification without any fear of abandonment or consequence, while the Daniels and Isabelles of the world will disappear forever. Elohimism represents a solution to the problem of aging that the novel poses, but that solution is nothing if not radical: we waste our time trying to reconcile ourselves to death—it is better simply to overcome it, by whatever means necessary.

Elohimism is a resounding success in the secular, post-Christian West of *La possibilité d'une île*. While it draws many of its initial members from the “milieux athées, aisés et modernes” (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 399), the Elohimite Church quickly becomes the dominant religion of Europe and then of the entire world, even managing to overwhelm Islam.⁹³ The clones of the Church's original members, whom we encounter

⁹³ “La chute de l'islam en Occident rappelle en fait curieusement celle, quelques décennies plus tôt, du communisme : dans l'un et l'autre cas, le phénomène de reflux devait naître dans les pays d'origine et balayer ensuite en quelques années les organisations, pourtant puissantes et richissimes, mises sur pied dans les pays d'accueil. Lorsque les pays arabes, après des années d'un travail de sape fait essentiellement de connexions Internet clandestines et de téléchargement de produit culturels décadents, purent enfin accéder à un mode de vie basé sur la consommation de masse, la liberté sexuelle et les loisirs, l'engouement des populations fut aussi intense and aussi vif qu'il l'avait été, un demi-siècle plus tôt, dans les pays communistes. Le mouvement partit, comme souvent dans l'histoire humaine, de la Palestine, plus précisément d'un refus soudain des jeunes filles palestiniennes de limiter leur existence à la procréation répétée de futurs djihadistes, et leur désir de profiter de la liberté de mœurs qui était celle de leurs voisines israéliennes. En quelques années, la mutation, portée par la musique techno... se répandit à l'ensemble des pays arabes, qui eurent à faire face à une révolte massive de la jeunesse, et ne purent évidemment y parvenir. Il devint alors parfaitement clair, aux yeux des populations occidentales, que les pays musulmans n'avaient été maintenus dans leur foi primitive que par l'ignorance et la contrainte ; privés de leur base

at the beginning of the text, have survived a series of wars and natural disasters and lead solitary lives inside heavily fortified compounds, which have been built to protect them from the few “human savages” that remain at the beginning of the fifth millennium. The neo-human clones have kept detailed records of their human predecessors, and the picture they paint of the last years of human civilization is shocking. Daniel25—the twenty-fifth incarnation of the original Daniel—writes of old age in Daniel1’s time,

Vieillir, à aucun moment de l’histoire humaine, ne semble avoir été une partie de plaisir; mais dans les années qui précédèrent la disparition de l’espèce c’était manifestement devenu à ce point atroce que le taux de morts volontaires, pudiquement rebaptisées *départs* par les organismes de santé publique, avoisinait les 100%, et que l’âge moyen de départ, estimé à soixante ans sur l’ensemble du globe, approchait plutôt les cinquante dans les pays les plus avancés (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 89).

Following a tradition begun by Daniel1, each clone is required to produce a “life story” for his or her subsequent incarnation: according to Daniel25, the life stories of the original members agree without exception on the “caractère insoutenable des souffrances morales occasionnées par la vieillesse” (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 89). While, in the text, events such as the massive dying-off of the elderly during the 2003 European heat wave manage at first to provoke the “indignation convenue” (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 90), Daniel24 tells us that this indignation “s’estompa vite, et le développement de l’euthanasie provoquée—ou de plus en plus souvent, librement consentie—devait au cours des décennies qui suivirent résoudre le problème” (Houellebecq, 2005a, pp. 90-91). Such criminal disregard for the happiness and suffering of the old, who, unable to participate in the culture of youth, come progressively to be treated “comme de purs déchets” (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 90), would be “inconcevable en Afrique, ou dans un

arrière, les mouvements islamistes occidentaux s’effondrèrent d’un seul coup” (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 351).

pays d'Asie traditionnel" (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 90), where ancestors are venerated. But in "un pays authentiquement moderne" (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 90) such as France, scenes similar to what occurred during the deadly European heat wave of 2003 are characteristic of the age:

...Plus de dix milles personnes, en l'espace de deux semaines, étaient mortes seules dans leur appartement, d'autres à l'hôpital ou en maison de retraite, mais toutes quoi qu'il en soit étaient mortes *faute de soins*. Dans les semaines qui suivirent [*Libération*] publia une série de reportages atroces, illustrés de photos dignes des camps de concentration, relatant l'agonie des vieillards entassés dans des salles communes, nus sur leurs lits, avec des couches, gémissant tout le long du jour sans que personne ne vienne les réhydrater ni leur tendre un verre d'eau; décrivant la ronde des infirmières, dans l'incapacité de joindre les familles en vacances, ramassant régulièrement les cadavres pour faire place à de nouveaux arrivants (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 90).

Elohimism makes repetition of these gruesome scenes unnecessary. Fear of death need not force one to cling foolishly to a decrepit life: the Elohimite wisely relinquishes the body once it becomes a source of suffering and awaits reincarnation in a new, youthful form. Though primarily a cult of youth, Elohimism is also a cult of death: promoting the elimination of physical undesirables, the religion provides moral justification for ridding society of its older members, whose physical appearance has become a source of terror and disgust for the young, and whose care requirements interfere with the life of carefree pleasure that twenty-first-century Westerners have come to expect.

The rise of the Elohimite Church confirms a thesis that Houellebecq has been developing throughout his work: that Western civilization, for lack of any reference to an ultimate principle that might found some sense of social unity and satisfy the human desire for immortality, is cannibalizing itself. The extermination of the old is the final stage of the process: for the first time in history, aging humans are consenting *en masse*

to their own extinction, while the younger generation, à la Esther, participate in more and more superficial and bestial forms of pleasure. The similarities between Daniel25's description of the "les sauvages" of the fifth millennium and Western culture in the twenty-first century in *Possibilité* are exemplary in this regard:

Sur un signe de sa part la musique se ralentit et les membres de la tribu formèrent un cercle, délimitant une sorte d'arène au centre de laquelle les deux assistants du chef amenèrent... deux sauvages âgés—les plus âgés de la tribu, ils pouvaient avoir atteint la soixantaine. Ils étaient entièrement nus, et armés de poignards... Le combat se déroula d'abord dans le plus grand silence ; mais dès l'apparition du premier sang les sauvages se mirent à pousser des cris, des sifflements, à encourager les adversaires. Je compris tout de suite qu'il s'agirait d'un combat à mort, destiné à éliminer l'individu le moins apte à la survie... Après les trois premières minutes il y eut une pause, ils s'accroupirent aux extrémités de l'arène, s'épongeant et buvant de larges rasades d'eau. Le plus corpulent semblait en difficulté, il avait perdu beaucoup de sang. Sur un signal du chef, le combat reprit. Le gros se releva en titubant ; sans perdre une seconde, son adversaire bondit sur lui et lui enfonça son poignard dans l'œil. Il tomba à terre, le visage aspergé de sang, et la curée commença. Le poignard levé, les mâles et les femelles de la tribu se précipitèrent en hurlant sur le blessé qui essayait de ramper hors d'atteinte... Au début, les sauvages découpaient les morceaux de chair qu'ils faisaient rôtir dans les braises, mais la frénésie augmentant ils se mirent à dévorer directement le corps de la victime, à laper son sang dont l'odeur semblait les enivrer... Je supposai qu'il s'agissait d'une rite d'union, un moyen de resserrer les liens du groupe—en même temps que de se débarrasser des sujets affaiblis ou malades; *tout cela me paraissait assez conforme à ce que je pouvais connaître de l'humanité* (Houellebecq, 2005a, pp. 452-453, my italics).

Houellebecq's verdict in *La possibilité d'une île* leaves little room for ambiguity: materialism leads not simply to nihilism, despair, and suicide—these we already encountered in *Les particules élémentaires*—but, in the end, results in the *re-animalization* of the human species. In the wake of this final degradation, Elohimism represents a last-ditch effort to preserve some pathetic minimum of humanity, if only by staving off the animal terror of extinction. At the same time, it fully acquiesces to the bestial, pleasure-seeking worldview that has become typical of the age. The Elohimite

Church unites its adherents around a simple proposition: God may be dead, and with Him the soul, but technology, through the process of cloning, grants us the possibility of at least some minimal transcendence. Is this very singular emphasis on immortality enough to make Elohimism a religion? Though the Church may be able to “garantir de la mort,” should not its total lack of supernatural references, as well as its unwillingness to establish a moral code that does anything more than promote the veneration of physical youth, disqualify it from true religionhood? More importantly still, even if the movement does meet some basic requirements for being a religion, is Elohimism—or something like it—an attractive option for us Westerners of the 21st century? My remaining comments in this chapter will be devoted to just these questions.

Can A Cloning Cult Be A Religion?

As I discussed above, defining religion is a difficult and contentious business, and much of the debate has concerned the degree to which belief in the supernatural should be considered a necessary component of religiosity. The work of Ninian Smart, for instance, whose influential theory of the seven dimensions of religion (doctrinal, mythological, ethical, ritual, experiential, institutional, and material) saves little space for the otherworldly, represents a more Durkheimian approach to the study of religiosity, while efforts by other theorists, also mentioned previously, include the supernatural as either an important or essential characteristic. To reiterate some of my previous comments, the tendency to elide reference to the supernatural originates most famously with French sociologist Émile Durkheim, who argued that the object of religious behavior was not the worship of God or gods but rather of the social body (in the case of

Durkheim's *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, the social body in question was the tribe). For Durkheim, even the doctrine of the soul was tied to concerns over the survival of the community: souls existed so that the identity of the tribe could be preserved, as the spirits of deceased members reincarnated in the bodies of the succeeding generation.⁹⁴ A theorist such as Rodney Stark, however, has argued that belief in the supernatural is the defining characteristic of religiosity: on his account, even “godless” religions such as Theravada Buddhism and Taoism still possess doctrines of reincarnation, while many of their most philosophical and non-theistic practitioners look forward to immortality (Stark, 2004, p. 17). While not all religions are theistic, all without exception posit the existence of “other worlds” and supernatural entities, which have the ability to suspend the laws of the natural world as they see fit. The inclusion of the supernatural is accordingly one of if not *the* major stake in contemporary debates concerning the definition of religion, with certain sociologists sticking to tradition and to Durkheim, while others follow Stark and thus a less classically sociological approach.

As I indicated earlier on in this chapter, my desire is to avoid entering into the ongoing debate about the definition of religion, even if, from the vantage point of pure personal preference, my own instincts (for what they are worth) tell me that the essence of religion lies as much in the supernatural as it does in the social. It is nevertheless

⁹⁴ “Les mythes que nous avons précédemment rapportés nous fournissent la seule explication qui puisse être donnée de cette croyance. Nous avons vu que les âmes des nouveau-nés étaient ou des émanations d’âmes ancestrales ou ces âmes mêmes réincarnées. Mais pour qu’elles pussent soit se réincarner soit dégager périodiquement des émanations nouvelles, il fallait qu’elles survécussent à leurs premiers détenteurs. Il semble donc bien qu’on ait admis la survie des morts pour pouvoir expliquer la naissance des vivants. Le primitif n’a pas l’idée d’un dieu tout-puissant qui tire les âmes du néant. Il lui semble qu’on ne peut faire des âmes qu’avec des âmes. Celles qui naissent ne peuvent donc être que des formes nouvelles de celles qui ont été ; par suite, il faut que celles-ci continuent à être pour que d’autres puissent se former. En définitive, la croyance à l’immortalité des âmes est la seule manière dont l’homme puisse alors s’expliquer à lui-même un fait qui ne peut pas ne pas frapper son attention ; c’est la perpétuité de la vie du groupe” (Durkheim, 1968, p. 384).

worth pointing out that it is no accident that Stark is just as suspicious of Durkheim as he is of secularization theory—for it is often the case that the same thinkers who believe that religion can be sloughed off by an act of historical will are the very same who see the supernatural pretensions of religious belief as a cover for social concerns (or psychological ones, as in the case of Freud). Believing as such makes it much easier to get religion out of the picture, since moving beyond it only requires reformulating a set of contingent social values, rather than eradicating the human need to address universal concerns about mortality, eternity, and meaning. In any event, these are matters for a well-trained sociologist of religion to address; for my purposes, I am content to subject Elohimism to analysis under a number of criteria, including—somewhat arbitrarily I will admit—the traditional conception of *religare*, or “binding,” both of man to man and man to God, Durkheim’s classical distinction between the sacred and the profane, and belief in the supernatural. Elohimism fits comfortably into the first two conceptions of religion, but its materialistic moorings make it difficult—though not impossible, I will argue—to identify the faith as a religion within a supernatural paradigm.

Religion as religare. The origins of the word “religion” are obscure, but since St. Augustine, it has been common to interpret the combination of the Latin prefix “re-“ and the verb “ligare” to convey the notion of “re-binding”, in particular of man to God through the person of Christ. The notion can also be extrapolated beyond its theological denotation to connote a binding of man to man under the auspices of a shared faith, or “in” the body of Christ, whose dual human and divine status permits both a vertical and horizontal integration of the human being into ultimate reality, both divine and social. In a more contemporary context, the re-binding power of religion can be viewed as an

alternative to the atomizing forces of modernity that haunt Houellebecq's fiction, with Elohimism providing a system of belief and practice that fosters human unity amidst the destruction that unchecked individualism has wrought.

In the specific case of *La possibilité d'une île*, we encounter a fictionalized twenty-first century Europe in which Christianity has succumbed to consumerism and the cult of youth, where the old are treated as human refuse and left to die alone in hospitals and retirement homes, and where mainstream art celebrates cruelty, selfishness, and violence.⁹⁵ The society of *La possibilité d'une île* suffers the same atomization as does that of *Les particules élémentaires*. Even the human ability to love has not survived in the age of materialism. Daniel's description of Esther and her friends reveals the extent of the destruction:

Ce que je ressentais, ces jeunes gens ne pouvaient ni le ressentir, ni même exactement le comprendre, et s'ils l'avaient pu ils en auraient éprouvé une espèce de gêne, comme devant quelque chose de ridicule et d'un peu honteux, comme devant un stigmate de temps plus anciens. Ils avaient réussi, après des décennies de conditionnement et d'efforts ils avaient réussi à extirper de leur cœur un des plus vieux sentiments humains, et maintenant c'était fait, ce qui avait été détruit ne pourrait se reformer, pas davantage que les morceaux d'une tasse brisée ne pourraient se réassembler d'eux-mêmes, ils avaient atteint leur objectif: à aucun moment de leur vie, ils ne connaîtraient l'amour. Ils étaient libres (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 334).

In this terrifying future, where deep, lasting human relationships have become not so much impossible as simply unwanted, traditional forms of human collectivity have been abandoned. Where once Christian religion provided a system of belief and practice that

⁹⁵ "Schématiquement, tu as trois grandes tendances. La première, la plus importante, celle qui draine 80% des subventions et dont les pièces se vendent le plus cher, c'est le gore en générale : amputations, cannibalisme, énucléations, etc. Tout le travail en collaboration avec les serial killers, par exemple" (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 144).

united humanity under a shared moral code,⁹⁶ in the twenty-first century of *Possibilité* mankind's sole moral imperative has become to pursue pleasure at all costs, and, once the body can no longer support such pursuit, to exit existence altogether. Elohimism, however, by unifying humanity around a common hope for immortality, does at least produce a semblance of a shared moral order, even if it appears flagrantly anti-humanistic: for the leaders of the Elohimite Church, in promising immortality to their adherents, believe, much as Djerzinski in *Les particules élémentaires*, that through technology they can restore the conditions that make love possible. Vincent, prophet of the Elohimite Church, tells Daniell,

L'homme n'a jamais pu aimer, jamais d'ailleurs que dans l'immortalité ; c'est sans doute pourquoi les femmes étaient plus proches de l'amour, lorsqu'elles avaient pour mission de donner la vie. Nous avons retrouvé l'immortalité, et la coprésence au monde ; le monde n'a plus le pouvoir de nous détruire, c'est nous au contraire qui avons le pouvoir de le créer par la puissance de notre regard. Si nous demeurons dans l'innocence, et dans l'approbation du seul regard, nous demeurons également dans l'amour (Houellebecq, 2005a, pp. 402-403).

Elohimism fulfills the social sense of *religare*—that it bind human beings together beneath the banner of a shared system of belief and practice. That binding occurs as the promise of immortality is realized: while Daniel and Isabelle's marriage dissolves when death makes its first effects felt on Isabelle's body, rendering her undesirable and thus unlovable, for the “immortal” Elohimites the body of the other is never a source of disgust and separation, but always of desire and union. L'ÉTERNITE, AMOUREUSEMENT: so goes the slogan of the Elohimite Church's initial advertising campaign (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 399). Love, which “lie, et lie à jamais” (Houellebecq,

⁹⁶ “Une religion est un système solidaire de croyances et de pratiques relatives à des choses sacrées, c'est-à-dire séparées, interdites, croyances et pratiques qui unissent en une même communauté morale, appelé Église, tous ceux qui y adhèrent” (Durkheim, 1968, p. 65).

1998a, p. 376), is only eternal so long as the body is eternal: love is bound exclusively to the body, and it is only by immortalizing the body that love can hope to endure.

Elohimism also fulfills the theological sense of *religare*, albeit in a limited or at the very least unconventional manner. In the place of a supernatural deity, Elohimism proposes the *Elohim*, a race of technologically superior extraterrestrials whom the Elohimites believe created life on earth. Daniel1, who encounters the cult when he meets two practitioners during a dinner party in Spain, offers the following description:

Le couple était élohimate, c'est-à-dire qu'ils appartenaient à une secte qui vénérât les Elohim, créatures extraterrestres responsables de la création de l'humanité, et qu'ils attendaient leur retour... Selon eux, tout reposait sur une erreur de transcription dans la Genèse: le Créateur, Elohim, ne devait pas être pris au singulier, mais au pluriel. Nos créateurs n'avaient rien de divin, ni de surnaturel ; ils étaient simplement des êtres matériels, plus avancés que nous dans leur évolution, qui avaient su maîtriser les voyages spatiaux et la création de la vie; ils avaient également vaincu le vieillissement et la mort, et ne demandaient qu'à partager leurs secrets avec les plus méritants d'entre nous (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 109).

Though the Elohimites of Daniel1's time do not live to see the return of their creators, the neo-humans of the fifth millennium still await the coming of "les Futurs." Different from their human predecessors, the neo-humans practice a cult of emotional and sensual asceticism, attempting to eradicate whatever remnants of desire remain from their ancestors. Such asceticism must be maintained until the arrival of the Future Ones, who alone can manage to "rejoindre le royaume de potentialités innombrables" (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 471). Daniel24, struggling to suppress bouts of sentiment as he nears death, writes in his commentary on Daniel1's *récit de vie*,

La disparition de la vie sociale était la voie, enseigne la Sœur suprême. Il n'en reste pas moins que la disparition de tout contact physique entre néo-humains a pu avoir, a encore parfois le caractère d'une ascèse; c'est d'ailleurs le terme même qu'emploie la Sœur suprême dans ses messages... La peau fragile, glabre, mal irriguée des humains ressentait

affreusement le vide des caresses. Une meilleure circulation des vaisseaux sanguins cutanés, une légère diminution de la sensibilité des fibres nerveuses de type L ont permis... de diminuer les souffrances liées à l'absence de contact. Il reste que j'envisagerais difficilement de vivre une journée entière sans passer ma main dans le pelage de Fox, sans ressentir la chaleur de son petit corps aimant. Cette nécessité ne diminue pas à mesure que mes forces déclinent, j'ai même l'impression qu'elle se fait plus pressante... Je quitterai sans vrai regret une existence qui ne m'apportait aucune joie effective. Considérant le trépas, nous avons atteint à l'état d'esprit qui était... celui que recherchaient les bouddhistes du Petit Véhicule; notre vie au moment de sa disparition 'a le caractère d'une bougie qu'on souffle.' Nous pouvons dire aussi, pour reprendre les paroles de la sœur suprême, que nos générations se succèdent 'comme les pages d'un livre qu'on feuillette...' Le soleil monte encore, atteint son zénith; le froid, pourtant, se fait de plus en plus vif. Des souvenirs peu marqués apparaissent brièvement, puis s'effacent. *Je sais que mon ascèse n'aura pas été inutile; je sais que je participerai à l'essence des Futurs* (Houellebecq, 2005a, pp. 163-165, my emphasis).

The restoration of human relationships, which the progressive isolation of the neo-humans has made impossible, can only take place under the tutelage of the Future Ones. So long as the thoughts of the neo-humans stay focused on the return of their creators, hope is sustained, and the ascetic rigor of their solitary existences remains bearable. Though disconnected from their peers, the neo-humans of the fifth millennium are bound, in thought and contemplation, to the beings that created them—beings on whom their union, and thus felicity, depends entirely.

The Elohim are not only humanity's creators and caretakers (as is the case for parents) but also its saviors. Faith in the existence of the Elohim and the salvific benefits of their return to earth places the Elohimites in a "binding" relationship of hope and anticipation with these out-worldly (though not otherworldly) beings. On the sole notion of *religare*, the religiosity of Elohimism cannot be denied.

The Sacred and The Profane. Émile Durkheim's understanding of religion rests at base on a distinction between the *sacred* and the *profane*. All religions, in Durkheim's

view, maintain this dichotomy; consequently, all systems of belief and practice that posit sacred and profane entities are religions. Durkheim writes,

All known religious beliefs, be they simple or complex, have one characteristic in common: they imply a classification realized by man of things, real or ideal, into two classes—two contrasting genera usually designated by two distinct terms, which are well expressed by the words *profane* and *sacred*. The division of the world into two domains which include everything that is sacred in the one, and everything that is profane in the other, is the characteristic feature of religious thought (Durkheim, 1994, p. 113).

What typifies the relationship between the sacred and the profane is the radical heterogeneity between the two realms (Durkheim, 1994, p. 115)—for example, the difference between a wafer of bread and the holy host after a Catholic priest has consecrated it. Sacred things are of a different order altogether than profane things, even to the point that the relationship between them may become one of antagonism (Durkheim, 1994, p. 116). As Durkheim adds,

...The mind shrinks automatically from allowing the corresponding things to intermingle, or even to come into contact with each other. Such promiscuity or even close contiguity is strongly inconsistent with the state of dissociation surrounding these ideas in people's *consciousness*. The sacred thing is pre-eminently that which the profane must not and cannot touch with impunity (Durkheim, 1994, pp. 116-117).

Though it denies all supernatural reality, Elohimism fits nicely into Durkheim's paradigm, incidentally revealing the degree to which the Durkheimian conception of religion dismisses the otherworldly as an essential characteristic of religiosity.

The Elohimite Church boasts no sacred chalices, holy relics, or pantheon of deities, but it does hold one object in higher value than all the rest: its adherents' DNA. The Elohimite organization takes great care to ensure that each member's genetic code is preserved indefinitely. Believers' DNA, replicated in five samples, is "conservé à basse

température dans des salles souterraines imperméables à la plupart des radiations connues, et qui pouvaient résister à une attaque thermonucléaire” (Houellebecq, 2005a, pp. 397-398). Similar to Christ buried in his tomb, the genetic material preserved in this underground laboratory awaits the day of its resurrection, when it will deliver to its owners the youthful, glorified bodies that the Church has promised. DNA in the Elohimite faith is a physical object, encased in the flesh of each adherent, but in which the sacred is nonetheless located. Its isolation in a subterranean laboratory only indicates the degree of that sanctity: for, hidden away and safe from human tampering, it belongs to a heterogeneous world of forbidden things, accessible only to the high priests of the faith (scientists, in the case of Elohimism), whose expertise permits them to handle this sacred material without risk of profaning it.

Elohimism also prescribes several rituals, the most consequential of which is the suicide rite that marks members’ “entrée dans l’attente de la résurrection” (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 352). Daniel25 writes in his *récit*,

Après une période de flottement et d’incertitude, la coutume s’installa peu à peu de l’accomplir en public, selon un rituel harmonieux et simple, au moment choisi par l’adepte, lorsqu’il estimait que son corps physique n’était plus en état de lui donner les joies qu’il pouvait légitimement en attendre. Il s’accomplissait avec une grande confiance, dans la certitude d’une résurrection proche... (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 353)

Besides evoking a parallel with early Christianity, during which hope for the resurrection of the body was matched by an equal certitude that Christ’s return was imminent, the Elohimite suicide ritual sanctifies a death that might otherwise be experienced as arbitrary and meaningless. By choosing to end their lives on their own terms, adherents avoid suffering the slow degradation of the aging body and are able to escape an

unpleasant embodiment in the company of their fellow believers, who affirm the soon-to-be departed in his or her hopes for rebirth.

When we consider these practices in conjunction with the doctrine of the Elohim, creators of all life, the existence of a prophet, who announces the return of the Elohim and their gift of immortality, and a host of other minor rituals, practices, and beliefs (which space concerns forbid me from describing here) we see that Elohimism maintains the very same distinction between the sacred and the profane that Durkheim theorized was characteristic of all religions. From this point of view, Elohimism is as much a religion as any other faith tradition: binding man to man as much as it does man to a higher power, and prescribing practices and beliefs that sanctify the body, both in life, death, and resurrection, the Church has all the sociological makings of a veritable religion. And yet it is missing something, something too obvious to go unnoticed, even by the most Durkheimian of sociologists. That something is...

The Supernatural. On first glance, Elohimism appears to distance itself radically from the supernatural: its “gods,” the Elohim, are no more than highly evolved material beings, while the “souls” of its adherents are equated with memories contained in the physical brain. For the Elohimites, no forces exist that may “suspend, alter, or ignore” (Stark, 2004, p. 10) the laws of nature; rather, it is precisely through the exploitation of those laws that immortality must and can only be achieved. Savant, the leading scientist among the Elohimites and a founding member of the Church, describes Elohimite immortality:

Je suppose que vous [Daniel1] vous rappelez ce que j’ai dit le premier jour du stage concernant la reproduction des neurones... Eh bien la reproduction d’un tel dispositif est envisageable, non pas dans les ordinateurs tels que nous les connaissons, mais dans un certain type de

machine de Turing, qu'on pourrait appeler les automates à câblage flou, sur lesquels je travaille à ce moment. Contrairement aux calculateurs classiques, les automates à câblage flou sont capables d'établir des connexions variables, évolutives, entre unités de calcul adjacentes; ils sont donc capables de mémorisation et d'apprentissage. Il n'y a pas de limite *a priori* au nombre d'unités de calcul pouvant être mises en relation, et donc à la complexité des circuits envisageable. La difficulté à ce stade, et elle est considérable, consiste à établir une relation bijective entre les neurones d'un cerveau humain, pris dans les quelques minutes suivant son décès, et la mémoire d'un automate non programmé. La durée de vie de ce dernier étant à peu près illimitée, l'étape suivante consiste à réinjecter l'information dans le sens inverse, vers le cerveau du nouveau clone; c'est la phase du *downloading*, qui, j'en suis persuadé, ne présentera aucune difficulté particulière une fois que l'*uploading* aura été mis au point (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 130).

Savant's optimistic apology for machine-mind transfer is an example of scientific fancy run amok. Such theories interest transhumanists who dream of uploading their brains onto supercomputers; their relation to real science is suspicious at best. Despite what Ray Kurzweil or the CEOs of Google would have us think,⁹⁷ the human mind is much more than an input-output machine (let us recall Searle's objection to strong A.I. in chapter two); it is molded over the years by interaction with the environment, and for this reason Savant's confidence should strike us as all the more dubious. On supernatural criteria, Elohimism does not look like a religion at all. It may pass the Durkheimian test for religiosity, but the absence of any belief in the otherworldly distinguishes it not only from the Western monotheisms, where belief in the One God and the soul is central, but also from the religions of the East, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism, where some form of human identity survives bodily death to be reincarnated in the next life.

⁹⁷ For a reference to Kurzweil, see footnote 30. The co-founders of Google, Sergei Brin and Larry Page, operate Singularity University in California, an institution dedicated to research in artificial intelligence and the "future of human experience" in a world where the limits between machine and man have become blurred. For a thorough exposé see Ashlee Vance's article "Merely human? That's so yesterday" (June 12, 2010). http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/13/business/13sing.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=merely human that's so yesterday&st=cse

If Elohimism is to be considered a religion according to the argument from the supernatural, some redefinition of the word *supernatural* is obviously in order. Such a reformulation is not, however, as unworkable as it may seem: for despite Elohimism's unswerving physicalist assumptions, it may still be possible to ascribe a sort of *metaphorical supernaturalness* to the faith. What Elohimism shares with the supernatural religions is the doctrine of *survival*—of the continuing of existence, in whatever form, beyond the death of the body. The means of that survival are radically different—in the case of the supernatural religions, survival is a matter of fact, while for Elohimites it must be artificially induced. But the object remains the same. Assuming the Elohimites are successful in their attempts (and this is a reasonable assumption, since the text indicates at places that the neo-humans possess something of the memories, and supposedly the consciousness, of their ancestors⁹⁸) the Church's doctrine of survival at least approximates belief in the traditionally supernatural rendering of immortality. Life beyond death remains possible; it is only the means of securing it that have changed. Processes taken to be supernatural have, in effect, been *naturalized*, without altering the nature of the result. Simply put, in Elohimism it is precisely the *supernatural nature of the supernatural that is called into question*. So long as it can guarantee its results, we may, by broadening the scope of the definition of *supernatural*, be able to grant Elohimism some provisional status as a religion.

Elohimism's claims to religionhood will be evaluated on the criteria we use for defining religion more generally. My inclination is to emphasize the supernatural in the definition of religion, and for that reason I would be more reluctant to admit Elohimism to the pantheon than would be, presumably, a Durkheimian socialist. In any event, the

⁹⁸ See footnote 78.

debate on this point could go on indefinitely, and ultimately what is more important in this discussion are not Elohimism's claims to religiosity, but rather its prospects in a religiously deinstitutionalized European civilization, its (potential) appeal to contemporary Westerners, and, perhaps most significant of all, the reasons Houellebecq chooses to devote an entire novel to it. Cloning cults of the kind we find, for example, among the Raël (the French sect upon which Houellebecq bases his portrayal of Elohimism)⁹⁹ may not be "true religions" on certain criteria, but their ability to respond effectively to contemporary existential concerns (such as fear of death and aging) might nonetheless one day make them serious competitors in the European religious marketplace. Below, I will address the likelihood that the "secular" environment in countries such as France could give rise to a New Age movement with the broad-based appeal that Elohimism enjoys in *Possibilité*, and the degree to which the emergence of such a movement—from Houellebecq's perspective and my own—would, in fact, be desirable.

The Religious Future of "Secular" Europe

For all the insightfulness of Houellebecq's treatment of religious change in a putatively post-Christian, religiously deinstitutionalized Europe, the author's comments risk falling on deaf ears. Cloning cults and other such fringe movements, whatever their merits may be for their practitioners, are obviously not able, at least in the current

⁹⁹ Elohimism is in fact Raelism with a different name. The Raelian sect, founded in France in 1974 by prophet Claude Vorilhon, holds that a race of extraterrestrials called the Elohim created life on Earth, and that many of the founding figures of the world religions, such as Jesus and Buddha, are in fact their prophets. Like the Elohimites, Raelians insist on a strictly physicalist understanding of human identity and openly dismiss the notions of soul and disembodied consciousness. Rather, they preach that with the help of science, it will one day be possible to preserve human consciousness through a combination of cloning and memory downloading/mind transfer. For a full-length discussion of the Raelian sect, see *Aliens Adored* by Susan J. Palmer (Rutgers University Press, 2004).

environment, to garner enough adherents to be taken seriously by the larger population, and are moreover constantly prey to accusations of fraud, psychological manipulation, and charlatanism. Their lack of appeal may be explained in two ways: on the one hand, most French men and women and other Europeans already believe in God or some supernatural power, and thus they have no need to clone themselves for the purposes of immortality; on the other hand, the laical ideologues of European states such as France, and even most believing French who nonetheless stand by the republic's political values, will identify in such movements an absurd, obscurantist pseudo-theology designed to dispossess citizens of their property and liberal freedoms. Nothing, or at least very little, about extant European religious trends indicates that a cult like Elohimism would ever be able to step out from the obscure theological margins that such movements occupy in the real world, and it is curious that Houellebecq takes the possibility of their emergence so seriously. As we have seen in previous chapters, Houellebecq's depiction of modernity as a godless wasteland has little basis in the facts: characters such as Rudi in *Lanzarote* do not represent the prevailing existential norm but rather belong to a periphery of extraordinarily alienated persons whose lives have been ruined by exceptional circumstances. Houellebecq's portrayal of religion in the West is the secularization thesis in an aestheticized, novelistic form: its analytical power is limited, however compelling or seductive it may be on first reading.

One of Houellebecq's most notable qualities as a writer is his unwillingness (or inability) to entertain reasonable solutions to the problems he poses. Cloning cults, asexual clones, and a race of neo-humans hardly count as viable answers to the existential dilemmas of materialism, even if the technology necessary to achieve such results is now

conceivable. Taken purely as antidotes to the decline of European Christianity's social and institutional relevance, Houellebecq's solutions are far from convincing. Whatever the institutional situation of religion may be, human beings on the whole remain religiously and spiritually-minded creatures: those ideologues and philosophers who expected that this tendency could be overcome have been thrown into the dustbin of political and intellectual history. Discussing the real prospects of a religious movement like Elohimism is only worthwhile when we consider that religion is not some sort of "optional feature" for advanced societies, to be turned on and off at the behest of the regime, but that it represents an inexorable facet of human existence that, as we saw in chapter three, no amount of ideological coercion or scientific discovery can suppress. The institutional disintegration of Christianity thus points not to a permanent religious vacuum, but to its replacement by some other faith tradition. And here the word on everyone's lips is not Elohimism or any other marginal cult, but rather—Islam.

If Houellebecq sees religion as a vital component of sustainable civilization, he cannot help but recognize the real potential of Islam to fill the empty institutional space left by the retreat of Christianity in the more "secularized" European nations (France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, etc.).¹⁰⁰ In this respect, Elohimism may represent for Houellebecq no more than a subversive means of negotiating his well-attested aversion to the Muslim faith, and moreover speaks, in its particular rendering within the text, to widespread worries in certain sectors of the European population about the influence of Islam on the official secularism of many Western states. Still, when we recognize Islam as a legitimate competitor in the European religious marketplace, Houellebecq's

¹⁰⁰ See the 2005 Eurobarometer report on European religiosity (discussed in chapter two) at: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_225_report_en.pdf

improbable prophesying about humanity's spiritual future reveals the ideological anxieties underlying such a seemingly fanciful exercise of the religious imagination. For, as soon as one has assumed religion not to be optional, but rather inevitable, it makes a great deal of sense that a person should want to elaborate a religion that serves the best interests of humanity, or that at the very least counterbalances the perceived dangers of Islamicization in Europe. Elohimism, as we have seen, is a far cry from such a religion, but Houellebecq works for serious reasons. In essence, then, Elohimism represents an *alternative to Islam*, a religion that Houellebecq, when provoked, has condemned in no uncertain terms.

Houellebecq's most offending comments about Islam are well known and have been the object of significant legal and media controversy. The author has his intellectual reasons for claiming Islam is the "stupidest religion"—his references on this point are such luminaries as Spinoza and Lévi-Strauss.¹⁰¹ Monotheism is, for Houellebecq, "le fait d'un crétin" (Houellebecq, 2001b)—a product of the desert and of its one-dimensionality, invented by "de Bédouins crasseux" who had nothing better to do than "enculer leurs chameaux" (Houellebecq, 2001a, pp. 243-244). Consequently, because Islam promotes the most strenuous form of monotheism, linked as it is to an intransigent legalism, it is the most deplorable of the monotheisms. Of course, condemnation of monotheism's autocratic nature is nothing new, and Houellebecq seems to forget that it was the Jews,

¹⁰¹ When asked in an interview about his feelings concerning public reactions to his comments on Islam, Houellebecq answered, "...Je ne m'y attendais pas tellement. Je sais que cela peut surprendre, mais quand je disais : 'l'islam, c'est quand même la religion la plus con,' c'était sur le ton de l'évidence. Je ne pensais pas que ce serait critiqué, ni même contesté. La plupart des bons auteurs du passé, de Spinoza à Lévi-Strauss, sont parvenus à la même conclusion ; je pensais donc pouvoir me contenter d'une synthèse rapide. Je n'avais pas saisi que le respect pour les identités était devenu si fort" (Houellebecq, 2009, p. 193).

not the Muslims, who first popularized the myth of the One God.¹⁰² What is most interesting in Houellebecq's observations about Islam is not his criticism of the religion, but rather the few moments in his texts and public comments where he explicitly contrasts Islam to the culture of the contemporary West. For instance, in his 2001 *Lire* interview, the author opines,

L'islam est une religion dangereuse, et ce depuis son apparition. Heureusement, il est condamné. D'une part, parce que Dieu n'existe pas, et que même si on est con, on finit par s'en rendre compte. A long terme, la vérité triomphe. D'autre part, l'Islam est miné de l'intérieur par le capitalisme. Tout ce qu'on peut souhaiter, c'est qu'il triomphe rapidement. Le matérialisme est un moindre mal. Ses valeurs sont méprisables, mais quand même moins destructrices, moins cruelles que celles de l'islam (Houellebecq, 2001b).

Houellebecq has fashioned this hope for the rapid collapse of Islam into a talking point for a number of the Muslim characters in his novels. Unable to condemn Islam on his own—at least not without risk of causing a legal stir—Houellebecq allows fictional Muslims to do it for him. In *Plateforme*, Michel, back in Thailand after Valérie's death, listens to the following rant by a Jordanian banker:

Le problème des musulmans, me dit-il, c'est que le paradis promis par le prophète existait déjà ici-bas: il y avait des endroits sur cette terre où des jeunes filles disponibles et lascives dansaient pour le plaisir des hommes, où l'on pouvait s'enivrer de nectars en écoutant une musique aux accents célestes; il y en avait une vingtaine dans un rayon de cinq cents mètres autour de l'hôtel. Ces endroits étaient facilement accessibles, pour y entrer il n'était nullement besoin de remplir les sept devoirs du musulman, ni de s'adonner à la guerre sainte; il suffisait de payer quelques dollars. Il n'était même pas nécessaire de voyager pour prendre conscience de tout cela; il suffisait d'avoir une antenne parabolique. Pour lui il n'y avait aucun doute, le système musulman était condamné: le capitalisme serait le plus fort. Déjà, les jeunes Arabes ne rêvaient que de consommation et de sexe. Ils avaient beau parfois prétendre le contraire, leur rêve secret était de s'agréger au modèle américain l'agressivité de certains n'était qu'une

¹⁰² In his essay "On the Suffering of the World," Arthur Schopenhauer refers to Judaism as "despotic theism" (Schopenhauer, 2006, p. 14).

marque de jalousie impuissante; heureusement, ils étaient de plus en plus à tourner carrément le dos à l'islam (Houellebecq, 2001a, pp. 338-339).

Houellebecq also depicts the collapse of Islam as a consequence of scientific modernity.

Desplechin, Djerzinski's colleague at the CNRS, tells the latter,

...Les religions sont avant tout des tentatives d'explication du monde; et aucune tentative d'explication du monde ne peut tenir si elle se heurte à notre besoin de certitude rationnelle. La preuve mathématique, la démarche expérimentale sont des acquis définitifs de la conscience humaine. Je sais bien que les faits semblent me contredire, je sais bien que l'Islam—de loin la plus bête, la plus fausse et la plus obscurantiste de toutes les religions—semblent actuellement gagner du terrain; mais ce n'est qu'un phénomène superficiel et transitoire: à long terme l'Islam est condamné, encore plus sûrement que le christianisme (Houellebecq, 1998a, pp. 335-336).

Islam finds itself doomed on two fronts: on the one hand, religion cannot survive the epistemological blitzkrieg of scientific rationality; on the other hand, contemporary Muslims are too fascinated by the capitalist model to be expected to remain faithful to the asceticism of Islamic life. It is perhaps impossible to say whether these predictions should be taken to express wishful thinking on Houellebecq's part, or whether they represent the author's reasoned conclusions about the future of the Muslim faith. Is Houellebecq simply afraid of Islam, or does he see its demise as an inevitable matter of historical course? Given the polemic surrounding the author's public comments about Islam, and considering the continuing influx of Muslim immigrants to Europe, little reason exists to think that Houellebecq is doing anything other than expressing in fictional guise the worries of a large segment of the French and European population.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ "...The debate [over *laïcité*] touches on what is considered the heart of French identity, at a moment when that identity has been challenged from above by European integration. Consequently, we cling to a pseudoconsensus on republican and national values, which seem to be dissolving from below, in the *banlieues* and the schools. At bottom, Islam is not the cause of the crisis of the French model but the mirror in which society now sees itself. France is experiencing the crisis of its identity through Islam" (Roy, 2007, p. 16).

In France, for example, school principals have protested when their Muslim students eat *halla* meat; in some instances, mayors and other elected officials have even called for the closing of *halla* supermarkets (Roy, 2007, pp 5, 28). Elohimism, however much it may stifle the existential whimpers of “post-Christian” Europeans, represents more seriously an alternative to an Islam that Houellebecq perceives as backward, repressive, and violent in its very origins.

But is Elohimism really a better solution to Western malaise than Islam? Is the suggestion that the elderly be euthanized less or more objectionable than forcing a woman to wear a burqa? Elohimism emerges as a grotesque response to the debauched morals of the day: it promotes free love for all, the cult of youth and of the young body, and the unrestrained pursuit of physical pleasure. *More specifically, it stands for everything that Islam abhors.* At least in my view, Islam has much work to do before it deserves the world's approbation: though possessing a rich philosophical and mystical tradition, in practice Islam remains a religion typified by violent imperialistic tendencies, the repression of women's rights, and a Coranic legalism that commands when it should interpret. Viewed in the context of the institutional decline of Christianity, Islam represents a last, desperate countermeasure to the moral collapse of Western civilization depicted in Houellebecq's novels. And yet, whatever the future of European Christendom may be, it seems impossible to prefer Elohimism to Islam. At the very least, Islam has its eyes on something otherworldly; the Islam of moderate Muslims places great emphasis on the moral and spiritual evolution of its practitioners, and in theory it possesses the ability to be just as humane as other religions at their best. Elohimism simply cannot match Islam, or any other religion, on this point: for its only

real object is the preservation of the body for the purposes of endless physical pleasure. In this regard, Elohimism looks more like a medical practice than a church. Religions in which the promise of immortality is absent may not be religions in the full sense, but neither are religions where immortality is the exclusive concern.

To be sure, it would be foolish to take Houellebecq's portrayal of Elohimism without a grain of salt. Houellebecq has done enough in other places to condemn the culture of consumerism and the narcissistic sexual commerce it encourages, and in the author's view the emergence of a self-centered, hedonistic religion like Elohimism may simply be the most logical outcome of religious expression in a materialistic and secular civilization. Indeed, the fact that the neo-humans choose to isolate themselves and pursue a life of asceticism only bespeaks the degree to which Elohimism fails in its attempt to create an authentic, spiritually grounded community. At his best, Houellebecq challenges us to think about our religious options in a future where the laical ideologies of the past have lost their luster and ability to unite, and where religions such as Islam, perceived by many as dangerous and regressive, risk trading major shares on the religious market. While certain commentators have seen in Houellebecq a person who wallows in the immorality of the West,¹⁰⁴ we ought to give the author his due. Houellebecq recognizes the despicability of materialist culture, and his depiction of the cult of youth in *La possibilité d'une île* can hardly be considered indulging. Houellebecq does not recommend the radical solutions of Elohimism any more than he suggests we embrace those of more extremist versions of the Muslim faith, but seems rather to be apprising us of our options—though of course on his own materialistic terms—while at the same time

¹⁰⁴ “Houellebecq is correct to attack the threat posed by Islamic fundamentalism, but he does nothing to decry the immorality that so horrifies the West's enemies. Rather, he wallows in it” (Beck, 2006, p. 17).

sending a clear warning about the dangers he sees in Islam. Subsequent decades, during which we may reasonably expect European polemics concerning Muslim immigration to become more intense, will give us a sense of exactly how significant Houellebecq's point of view may be.

It is very easy to hope that religion will just disappear. The classical secularization theorists predicted it, and the New Atheists (Dawkins, Hitchens, Dennett) are champing at the bit to see it happen. With Houellebecq, however, we are challenged to take a very different view. Like his fellow Frenchmen Comte and Durkheim, Houellebecq sees religion as a fundamental element of social cohesion. Man, for all three thinkers, is an "animal of the religious type."

Discussion of religion's future in a society where its traditional institutional moorings have been unbraided, and where secularism is the political orthodoxy, is risky to say the least. Islam may one day gain enough momentum to undermine France's intransigent laicism; in that case, we may see French laical identity rejuvenated in the ensuing row. On the other hand, Catholicism may reconquer the Hexagon with a concerted effort at modernization. Or perhaps some Westernized version of Islam will be installed as the West's leading religion. What is clear, in any case, is that *something* will happen. In the wake of the demise of classical theories of secularization, which equated modernity with the diminution and eventual disappearance of religion on all fronts, one cannot help but sense the urgency of Rudi's comment in *Lanzarote* that "les communautés humaines ont toujours eu le plus grand mal à s'organiser sans la référence à un principe supérieur" (Houellebecq, 2000a, p. 71). On the available evidence, European men and women will continue to entertain personal belief in the supernatural,

but it is unrealistic to think that this situation can endure forever: religion that retreats into the personal may eventually retreat into the abyss. Religion's awkward inexorability poses a serious dilemma for fashionable atheism, as it does for “secular” society in general: the problem not of determining how to loosen religion’s influence, but rather of how to elaborate a religion that serves the best interests of all human beings—a kind of *world-rational religion*, which cobbles together what is best in each faith tradition and makes an attempt to accommodate religion’s traditional enemy, science. Houellebecq, as I have argued, inspires us (indirectly) in this effort, for he is willing to initiate a discourse on the future of religion that few in France—neither *cathos* nor *laïcs*, to invoke an old dichotomy—would want to listen to, and which the laical segments of French society likely do not even have the conceptual tools to understand. In guise of a conclusion to this chapter, let me then say this: though Houellebecq’s philosophical predicates may be dubious; though he may see materialism and atheism where there is only the decline of France’s native religious tradition; and while unscrupulous critics may even ignore the intellectual content of the author’s work altogether, preferring to condemn Houellebecq for his perversity, political incorrectness, and pessimism, it remains the case that no novelist writing today can boast a comparable sensitivity to the moral, psychological, and political stakes of religious change in contemporary France, if not in Europe more generally. Houellebecq’s potential interest for scholars of religion, be they sociologists, literature teachers, or theologians, is vast.

Despite his atheism and contempt for monotheism, Houellebecq at times shows remarkable openness to the *fait religieux*. Different from so many contemporary intellectuals, the author acknowledges and makes central to his work humanity's limitless

need for transcendence, and for this reason his thought remains largely misunderstood by secular European scholars, who tend to see in him either nothing more than a critic of capitalism and liberal culture, or a social reject whose underlying pathos is that of a child abandoned by his mother. Let no one have any doubts: not to read Houellebecq *religiously* is to read him only partially. Houellebecq's discourse on religion is an uncomfortable one—for it identifies in religion something that is fundamentally *necessary*. Therein lies the scandal—and the critical silence.

CHAPTER V:
HOUELLEBECQ IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

In Search of a Rational Religion

*...Deep down, I am with the utopians, people who think that the movement of History must conclude in an absence of movement. And end to History seems desirable to me.*¹⁰⁵

Houellebecq's concern with the spiritual future of the West is foreign to much of mainstream twentieth-century intellectualism. At least in France, the middle decades of the previous century saw an intellectual milieu preoccupied with Marxism, Maoism, and the ideals of 1968, and devoted to some or another form of secular socialism. Sartre's claim at the end of *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* that "L'existentialisme n'est pas autre chose qu'un effort pour tirer toutes les conséquences d'une position athée cohérente" (Sartre, 1965, p. 94) would seem a proper summary of the period's intellectual commitments: God removed from the human scene, and with Him any possibility of founding a notion of *rights* or *essence*—with the additional consequence that humanity is now free to fashion itself according to its whim, without regard for Providence. Freedom from divine will is as old as modernity, but in the case of philosophers such as Sartre (and certainly among Marxists of the subsequent generation of intellectuals, among whom figured the likes of Althusser, Bourdieu, and Foucault) it came with the added requirement of radical self-determination. Claims to essence were the product of dominant bourgeois institutions and the so-called "sites of power" they concealed; the task of the intellectual was to unmask and render intelligible those mechanisms of power in the interest of liberating human subjectivity from its bourgeois slave drivers. Such was

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Varsava (2005b), p. 145.

essentially the work of Foucault, and, in a different era, of Marx. Of course, these broadly Marxist or Marxist-inspired endeavors necessarily posited some essential human need for liberty and self-determination: after all, the limitless freedom to create oneself, or a society, as one chooses opens the door to totally unprincipled empiricism, and, we ought to admit, totalitarianism.

For historical reasons that I will pass over here, prominent segments of the French intelligentsia—specifically those in public view—eventually abandoned intellectual Marxism, first for Maoism, in light of revelations about Stalin, and then, following revelations about Mao, in favor of a new humanist movement, led most notably by *nouveaux philosophes* Bernard-Henri Lévy and André Glucksmann. Belief in *History* and the *Dialectic* has since dropped off much of the French intellectual radar, but the problem of Godlessness remains.¹⁰⁶ As Lévy writes in *Left in Dark Times*: “No other heaven, ever again. No more uncreated truths, of any kind... We have to imagine happy atheists... That’s the price of democracy” (Lévy, 2008, p. 211). The fundamental dilemma persists: that of legitimating morality and the social order on the basis of rights that have no divine sanction. Marxists had History; Liberals have Humanism. Believers have God. That’s a hard act to follow.

If Houellebecq’s political leanings are difficult to pin down (on the one hand, he condemns capitalism, on the other, he celebrates traditional morality) this is because the intellectual and political evolution I have outlined above—from atheist Marxism (à la Sartre) to atheist humanism (à la Lévy)—is not the author’s ideological starting point: both movements represent unsuccessful attempts to sanction morality and justify the social order in the absence of God, basing their claims to what constitutes human

¹⁰⁶ See Lévy (2008), pp. 65-68.

happiness on an economic conception of human nature; subsequently, both movements fail, one at the political level, the other at the moral level. As I have been at pains to demonstrate in previous pages, social collapse in the Houellebecquian universe occurs in the transition from a theological to an economic understanding of the human being, not in the alternations between socialism and liberalism (however calamitous these may be).

If Houellebecq focuses on the particular forms of social and psychological turmoil suffered under the liberal regime, he does so because he lives in it; had he been a writer born in Soviet Russia, one imagines the author's hostility to the regime there, though different in particulars, would have been similar in principle—and for similar reasons. If we are to understand the *point de départ* of Houellebecq's critique of the West, we must therefore go back before Althusser, before Sartre and Camus, before even Marx. We must, in effect, return to the *socialist utopians* of the early nineteenth century, specifically Charles Fourier and Saint-Simon; to the revolutionaries—Robespierre in particular; and, of course, to Comte. Socialism from Marx onward turns to atheism; socialism before Marx was part of a larger effort to fill the religious vacuum left by the Revolution. That effort continues to this day, with Houellebecq the unlikely (and unwitting) leader of the charge.

Critics of the French Revolution did not await the events of 1793 in order to voice their concerns. Writing in 1790, three years before the decapitation of Louis XVI, Englishman Edmund Burke decried the burgeoning atheism of the new French republic, declaring,

We [Burke is speaking of Englishmen] know, and it is our pride to know, that man is by his constitution a religious animal; and that atheism is against, not only our reason but our instincts; and that it cannot prevail long. But if, in the moment of riot, and in a drunken delirium from the hot

spirit drawn out of the alembick of hell, which in France is now so furiously boiling, we should uncover our nakedness by throwing off the Christian religion which has hitherto been our boast and comfort, and one great source of civilization amongst us, and among many other nations, we are apprehensive (being well aware that the mind will not endure a void) that some uncouth, pernicious, and degrading superstition, might take place of it (Burke, 2009, pp. 90-91).

Burke was remarkably prescient in his insights, for it would not take long before Robespierre was to stand before the *Comité de Salut Public* and offer virtually the same discourse, in this case directed toward the leaders of the government:

Vous vous garderez bien de briser le lien sacré qui les unit [les Français] à l'auteur de leur être. Il suffit même que cette opinion ait régné chez un peuple pour qu'il soit dangereux de la détruire. Car les motifs des devoirs et les bases de la moralité s'étant nécessairement liés à cette idée, l'effacer, c'est démoraliser le peuple (Robespierre, 1989, p. 318).

What we see in Burke and Robespierre is a preoccupation not only with the moral and spiritual wellbeing of French society during a time of growing atheism, but also with the ability of the Republic to survive in the absence of divine sanction.¹⁰⁷ For Robespierre, the foundation of civil society was “la morale” (Robespierre, 1989, p. 309), so much so that the idea of the Supreme Being, as a “rappel continuel à la justice” (Robespierre, 1989, p. 317), was at once both “sociale” and “républicaine” (Robespierre, 1989, p. 317). Robespierre experienced only marginal success in his attempts to institute the cult of the Supreme Being, and with the Concordat of 1801 under then-Consul Napoleon, the Catholic Church was able to pick up where it had left off at the height of the Revolution. Even so, concerns over the revolutionary tendency to overthrow entrenched social institutions, be they churches, monarchs, or the university system, without offering

¹⁰⁷ Realistically, Burke was more concerned with the “contagion” of revolution spreading to England, as we see in his condemnation of Richard Price’s sermon (Burke, 1984) to dissenters (English non-Anglican Protestants), who had become disgruntled when the English government forbid them from voting or holding public office (The Test Acts).

anything concrete to replace them remained and remain to this day a part of counter-revolutionary criticism, with eerily similar rhetoric matching up over centuries-wide stretches of time. Raymond Aron, for instance, wrote of the 1968 student uprising, “They will not build a new order, but they have in effect made a breach in the wall of the old order through which other irrational, unpredictable forces may flood” (Aron, 1969, p. 5). Just what “uncouth, pernicious and degrading superstition” was to flood through that breach and take the place of those institutions throttled by the student revolts? On Houellebecq’s account, it was the sexual revolution for which the ’68 generation was principally responsible, a sea change in Western morality that squared perfectly with the liberal, capitalist individualism that was pouring into France from across the Atlantic. Houellebecq writes,

Il est piquant de constater que cette *libération sexuelle* a parfois été présentée sous la forme d’un rêve communautaire, alors qu’il s’agissait en réalité d’un nouveau palier dans la montée historique de l’individualisme. Comme l’indique le beau mot de « ménage », le couple et la famille représentaient le dernier îlot de communisme primitif au sein de la société libérale. La libération sexuelle eut pour effet la destruction de ces communautés intermédiaires, les dernières à séparer l’individu du marché. Ce processus de destruction se poursuit de nos jours (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 144)

It is an old complaint among conservative French intellectuals that the institution done away with, no matter how inadequate or defective, tends to be replaced by something even worse. Absolute monarchy and clericalism may have had their downsides, but they were certainly much preferable to the Reign of Terror; Gaullist patriarchy may have been oppressive to women, but it was far superior to the culture of sex shops and swingers clubs that appeared in the 1970s. Whether such recrimination is merely reactionary, nostalgic, or, on the contrary, thoroughly justified, is perhaps impossible to determine.

Still, we see this anxiety about progressivism as much in the person of Robespierre as we do in Houellebecq; and so long as Republican France, with its occasional revolutionary hiccups, continues to exist, we will likely never hear the end of it.

None of this is to say that Houellebecq, had he come of age during the Revolution, would have allied himself with the counter-revolutionaries. We can at least imagine him agreeing with Robespierre that “...si l’existence de Dieu, si l’immoralité de l’âme n’étaient que des songes, elles seraient encore la plus belle de toutes les conceptions de l’esprit humain” (Robespierre, 1989, p. 317). Whatever the case may be, unmistakable affinities exist between Houellebecq’s utopian vision of a post-liberal, post-human West, and the religious utopianism of such writers as Auguste Comte, Saint-Simon, and Charles Fourier, all of whom were concerned with what they perceived to be the deleterious social and moral consequences of the Revolution. The bases of Houellebecquian utopia are to be found not in the atheist Marxism of the twentieth century, but in the religious socialism of the nineteenth. Houellebecq owes his intellectual and creative debts to a century that is not his own; we must always keep this in mind if we are to arrive at a proper understanding of his utopianism.

The Fresh Ruins of France¹⁰⁸

Since Marx, it has been customary to equate socialism with atheism, and to conceive of religion as hostile to the socialist agenda. Those who adhere to this perspective would indeed be surprised to learn that some of the most ardent pre-Marxist socialists (those of early-nineteenth century France in particular) saw a yawning gap

¹⁰⁸ “The fresh ruins of France, which shock our feelings wherever we can turn our eyes, are not the devastation of civil war; they are the sad but instructive monuments of rash and ignorant counsel in time of profound peace” (Burke, 1984, p. 41).

between the blossoming industrial and capitalist system of Western Europe and what they considered to be God's plans for Creation. The utopian vision of Charles Fourier, a man who attacked capitalism with considerably more lucidity and style (though perhaps with less precision) than Marx did with his muddled, dialectical prose, was founded on a notion of human progress that relied on a synthesis of the impulsive actions of human beings and the ordering rationality of God. For Fourier, "Dieu est intelligence autant que l'homme est impulsion, et séparer les deux principes qui les constituent, c'est détruire l'harmonie du monde et les conditions de l'essor des passions" (Goret, 1974, p. 82). Nothing about this theological view of human affairs prevented Fourier from identifying the concept of private property with the "droit de gérer arbitrairement les intérêts généraux pour satisfaire les fantaisies individuelles" (Fourier, 1953, p. 84). God's desire for humanity was that persons should live in harmony with each other—in essence, that they should free themselves from the chains of individuality—with onerous and agreeable tasks shared among the members of the Phalanx, along with the fruits of collective labor. Capitalism, which sentenced certain members of society to material misery while elevating others to senseless opulence, was thus to be condemned. Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon, teacher of the young Auguste Comte, also recruited religion in his attempts to address concerns about social upheaval and disharmony following the Revolution. Saint-Simon advocated a *Nouveau Christianisme*, cured of its errant theologizing and metaphysical pitfalls and directed solely at the "amélioration la plus rapide du bien-être de la classe la plus pauvre" (Saint-Simon, 1977, p. 118). Such an endeavor, in his view, represented the "but unique du Christianisme" (Saint-Simon, 1977, p. 118) and was the only sure means of gaining eternal life (Saint-Simon, 1977, p. 154).

Finally, Robespierre, who had nothing but scorn for the corrupt clerics of the *Ancien Régime*, wrote,

Laissons les prêtres et retournons à la divinité. Attachons la morale à des bases éternelles et sacrées; inspirons à l'homme ce respect religieux pour l'homme, ce sentiment profond de ses devoirs, qui est la seule garantie du bonheur social; nourrissons-le par toutes nos institutions; que l'éducation publique soit dirigée vers ce but. Vous lui imprimerez sans doute un grand caractère, analogue à la nature de notre gouvernement et à la sublimité des destinées de notre République (Robespierre, 1989, p. 324).

For Fourier, Saint-Simon, and Robespierre, religion played a key role in the quest for social justice. In Fourier's case, the critique of capitalism was inseparable from the author's conception of divine will, reminding us that post-Revolutionary socialism was not so much an effort to surpass capitalism as an "attempt to discover a successor... to the Christian Church" (Jones & Patterson, 1996, p. xxvi). Two centuries later, Houellebecq shares the essence of this point of view, even as he decries the sins of liberalism; for liberalism, in the Houellebecquian worldview, is not the cause but the consequence of secularism and materialism. Accordingly, the real prospects for human happiness lie in a "refonte ontologique" (the aforementioned "quantum paradigm shift" in *Les particules élémentaires*) of the human species, not in the chimera of revolution.

To be sure, Houellebecq shares much more in common with Robespierre, Fourier, Saint-Simon, and Comte than the latter's attempts to combine social progress with some kind of religious ethos (though this is doubtlessly one of their main similarities). Below, I address each author's principal ideas (excluding Robespierre, whom I have already discussed) in conjunction with the guiding notions of Houellebecq's utopianism. Comte, whom I have not yet discussed in this chapter, will figure last, since his Religion of Man

represents a point of transition between the more theistic socialism of Fourier and Saint-Simon and the atheist socialism of Marx.

Charles Fourier. In *Houellebecq au laser: la faute à Mai 68*, Bruno Viard describes Houellebecq's famous rapprochement of sexual and economic competition in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* as "totalement insolite" (Viard, 2008, p. 41). Most of us are familiar with the main points of the narrator's reasoning: just as economic competition creates a hierarchy between those who possess monetary wealth and those who do not, so sexual competition introduces disparities between those with great sexual capital (the young, the beautiful, the virile) and those with little (the ugly, the disabled, the old, etc.). In societies where adultery is permitted phenomena of "absolute pauperization" in matters of sex will therefore appear: those with a large amount of sexual capital will have access to sex nearly every day, while those without such capital will be placed in a situation of forced abstinence (Houellebecq, 1994, pp. 114-115). Twentieth-century capitalism is to blame for this development, for during this period individualism and liberal morality have combined with the powerful desire-engineering tools of modern advertising to create the *hypermarché social* (Houellebecq, 2009, pp. 27-28). In times past, the parameters of sexual exchange were "tributaires d'un système de description lyrique, impressionniste, peu fiable"; today, sexual commerce has been reduced to "des critères simples et objectivement vérifiables" (Houellebecq, 2009, p. 30). Choosing a sexual partner has *literally* become like choosing a piece of meat: those with the greatest amount of sexual capital quickly devour the freshest, most succulent portions, while the insipid, expired meat is shrink-wrapped and consigned to some gloomy refrigerator that no one will ever open, finally to be tossed into the oven and incinerated

once its market value has expired. It is a brutal, animalistic system, but nonetheless a system we all accept (Houellebecq, 1994, p. 171).

Houellebecq's depiction of sexuality ruled by market forces is not so "unusual" as we might think, so long as we take unusual to mean *unique*. Charles Fourier, perhaps the most creative of all nineteenth-century socialist utopians, prefigures much of Houellebecq's discourse on sexuality in his prescriptions for sexual utopia within the community of the phalanx.¹⁰⁹ Given the time and place, Fourier did not offer a *strict* parallel between sexuality and the market economy, but many of his comments indicate a kind inchoate understanding of the phenomenon. Fourier writes,

La raison, quelque étalage qu'elle fasse de ses progrès, n'a rien fait pour le bonheur de l'homme tant qu'elle n'a pas procuré à l'homme social cette fortune qui est l'objet de tous les vœux : et j'entends par FORTUNE SOCIALE une opulence graduée qui mette à l'abri du besoin les hommes les moins riches et qui leur assure au moins pour *minimum* le sort que nous nommons MÉDIOCRITÉ BOURGEOISE (Fourier, 1953, p. 134).

Is it not possible to consider reasonable access to sex part of bourgeois mediocrity? Reason, and by extension modernity, whose technological prowess and economic might are unmatched in any other period of human history, have given us progress but not a basic equality of means, either material or sexual. Tisserand, for example, has access to all the amenities and material comforts of modern existence—he even has the means to pay for prostitutes—but his ugliness forbids him the slightest possibility of finding love (or at the very least someone who *desires* to have sex with him, which in Houellebecq's

¹⁰⁹ The centerpiece of Fourier's system was the *phalanstère*, or phalanx, a sort of "grand hôtel" in which a set number of persons—1620 was the ideal number—would be grouped according to specific personality traits. Fourier theorized the existence of 810 distinct kinds of personality; thus, in a community of 1620 persons, each member would have at least one person of the same personality type. Fourier was intensely systematic in his prescriptions for the ideal community, and his distaste for "civilization," as he referred to industrial and liberal modernity, seems to have known no bounds. The details of Fourier's utopianism are too complex to address here, and I am assuming the reader already has some familiarity with them. For a summary, see Jones and Patterson's introduction to *The Theory of the Four Movements* (1996).

novels often counts for as much). Sensitive to the arbitrary sexual injustices visited upon those, like Tisserand, who possess meager erotic capital, Fourier thus made provisions for a “cadre de fonctionnaires des deux sexes” within the phalanx, “un ordre quasi religieux et particulièrement respecté... qui satisferont charitablement, voire à deniers comptant, les besoins amoureux des vieillards, des délaissés, des disgraciés de la nature” (Armand, 1953, p. 29). These functionaries would work not only for money but also for human happiness; they would constitute, so to speak, a class of *prostituées engagées*, whose purpose would be to sustain a level of erotic mediocrity among “nature’s disgraced.” Not surprisingly, Fourier’s apology for prostitution is similar in certain respects to what we encounter in *Plateforme*, where Houellebecq portrays Asian prostitutes as a professional erotic elite who service sex-starved Westerners no longer able to find physical satisfaction in their home countries. The narrator, Michel, opines to Jean-Yves,

...d’un côté tu as plusieurs centaines de millions d’Occidentaux qui ont tout ce qu’ils veulent, sauf qu’ils n’arrivent plus à trouver de satisfaction sexuelle: ils cherchent, ils cherchent sans arrêt, mais ils ne trouvent rien, et ils en sont malheureux jusqu’à l’os. De l’autre côté, tu as plusieurs milliards d’individus qui n’ont rien, qui crèvent de faim, qui meurent jeunes, qui vivent dans des conditions insalubres, et qui n’ont plus rien à vendre que leur corps, et leur sexualité intacte. C’est simple, vraiment simple à comprendre: c’est une situation d’échange idéale (Houellebecq, 2001a, p. 234).

Different from Fourier’s conception of the prostitute-client relationship, in *Plateforme* it is market forces, not charity and compassion, that govern the exchange between prostitute and Westerner. Still, we can credit Fourier with having systematized the notion of *sexual charity*, as well as with having understood that the possibility of its realization lay well outside the boundaries of liberal, Western civilization. In *Plateforme*, Houellebecq imagines a twenty-first century version of Fourier’s sexual utopia, in which the

relationship between prostitute and client is reduced to the parameters of simple economic exchange. In many respects, the fate reserved for Valéry and *Eldorado Aphrodite* can be read as a commentary on the naiveté of Fourier's vision.

Houellebecq's affinities with Fourier go well beyond the two authors' similar treatments of sexual inequality. Women, for both Houellebecq and Fourier, are not the fairer sex but quite simply the *better* sex, and social progress depends not on the mere participation of women in the social order, but on their ascendancy. Fourier, who coined the term *feminism*, claimed that "l'extension des privilèges des femmes est le principe général de tous progrès sociaux" (Fourier, 1953, p. 124), and insisted that women, once placed "en état de liberté," would surpass men "dans toutes les fonctions d'esprit ou de corps qui ne sont pas l'attribut de la force physique" (Fourier, 1953, p. 125). Houellebecq seconds Fourier's analysis, though in his case the celebration of female nature is as focused on maternity as it is on intelligence. During one of his more catatonic moments, Djerzinski reflects in *Les particules élémentaires*,

Au milieu de cette saloperie immonde, de ce carnage permanent qu'était la nature animale, la seule trace de dévouement et d'altruisme était représentée par l'amour maternel, ou par un instinct de protection, enfin quelque chose qui insensiblement et par degrés conduisait à l'amour maternel. La femelle calmar, une petite chose pathétique de vingt centimètres de long, attaquait sans hésiter le plongeur qui s'approchait de ses œufs [...] décidément, les femmes étaient meilleures que les hommes. Elles étaient plus caressantes, plus aimantes, plus compatissantes et plus douces; moins portées à la violence, à l'égoïsme, à l'affirmation de soi, à la cruauté. Elles étaient en outre plus raisonnables, plus intelligentes et plus travailleuses (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 205).

In Djerzinski's perspective, modern man is reduced to a sperm donor, a creature whose only biological utility, beyond reproducing the species, lies in his now obsolete ability to defend women and children from bears (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 205). Unsurprisingly,

Houellebecq is in total agreement with his protagonist on this point: among the *bonnes nouvelles* that the author announces in *Les particules élémentaires*, we find the declaration that “les femmes continuent bizarrement à être capables d'amour et qu'il m'apparaît souhaitable de revenir à une société matriarcale. Les hommes ne servent à rien, si ce n'est, à l'heure actuelle, à reproduire l'espèce” (Houellebecq, 1998b).

Houellebecq's view is a radicalization of Fourier's, for the latter never advocated a matriarchal society, any more than he considered men useless biological anachronisms. But both authors agree that the prevalence, forced or otherwise, of female nature over male nature is a prime indicator of social progress. Like Fourier, Houellebecq's discourse on female superiority represents a celebration of what he conceives to be the superior moral and intellectual nature of women. Feminism of the sort de Beauvoir advocated, for instance, only pushes women to imitate the worst in men: careerism, infidelity, egotism, etc. (Houellebecq, 2009, pp. 165-166). Essentially, such “women to work” feminism hurls women headlong betwixt the ravenous jowls of capitalism, where their female nature is trampled and finally destroyed. If society is to move beyond the barbarism of the liberal system, women need not simply be equal to men, materially and economically speaking, but rather must surpass them in virtue and intelligence by exploiting their own particularly feminine nature.

Other commonalities exist between Fourier and Houellebecq's work, and before moving on I should signal them for readers who may be interested in exploring these matters more deeply. Within Fourier's Phalanx, children were to be separated from adults and made to eat and sleep in different rooms; in this way, “...les parents auront d'autant plus de plaisir à les cajoler qu'ils les verront moins” (Armand, 1953, p. 29). In

La possibilité d'une île, Fourier's recommendation is radicalized in the form of "child-free zones," residences created "à destination de trentenaires décomplexés qui avouaient sans ambages ne plus pouvoir supporter les hurlements, la bave, les excréments, enfin les inconvénients environnementaux qui accompagnent d'ordinaire la *marmaille*" (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 67). In Fourier's account, child-rearing is an unjustifiable imposition upon adult happiness and should be entrusted to the care of willing professionals; parents will love their children more for having to see them less, while in *Possibilité* the reader gets the impression that certain parents do not love their children at all! Fourier and Houellebecq also demonstrate similar incredulity toward the notion of *rights*. For Fourier, "equality is the cause that mows down three million young men" (Fourier, 1996, p. 280), and morality was the "fifth wheel on a cart," the concept of which only existed because human beings had hitherto been unable to establish a natural harmony amongst themselves (Jones and Patterson, pp. xix-xx).

Similarly, in *Les particules élémentaires* and *La possibilité d'une île*, both neo-human communities disparage the notion of human rights (Houellebecq, 1998a, pp. 385-386; Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 43), and in *Particules* social harmony is achieved not through some evolution in mentalities or resurgence of commitment to "human dignity," but rather by breeding out those characteristics of the human species, primarily selfishness and individualism, that had necessitated such insistence on natural rights during the materialist era. For Fourier, modification of social organization is the key to harmony; for Houellebecq, such harmony depends on modification of the human genome—a shift in technological possibility rather than in philosophy. In both cases, the institution of rights is necessary only where natural harmony cannot be achieved.

Finally, we find in Fourier and Houellebecq's utopian scenarios a curious preoccupation with number. Where Fourier identified 810 personality types and insisted that each phalanx be composed of between fifteen-hundred and sixteen-hundred members (Fourier, 1953, p. 136), in *Particules*, Djerzinski proposes that the number of neo-humans always be a prime number, divisible only by itself and one (a symbolic warning against "[des] regroupements partiels" (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 390)). Houellebecq and Fourier only differ significantly on the question of Providence. God is absent from the programmatic utopias of *Les particules élémentaires* and *La possibilité d'une île*, whereas He is an integral component of Harmony. If Houellebecq chooses to declare himself a Comtian rather than a Fourierist, it is no doubt due to this fundamental difference.

Saint-Simon. Like Charles Fourier, Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon envisioned utopia in religious terms. In the latter's case, however, bringing about earthly paradise depended not on the arcane metaphysical abstractions of Fourier's theories of Harmony and passionate attraction, but rather on a concerted "de-theologizing" of the Christian faith. In Saint-Simon's view, both the Catholic and Protestant versions of Christianity were heresies. Catholicism had allowed itself to become obsessed with theological and doctrinal minutiae (Saint-Simon, 1977, p. 126), while Protestantism had diminished the social importance of Christianity by placing the personal relationship between man and God above the good of society (Saint-Simon, 1977, p. 158). Gaining eternal life was no more a matter of reciting prayers in Latin, eating fish on Fridays, or self-flagellation (Saint-Simon, 1977, pp. 153-154), as it was of adopting a particular epistemological standpoint vis-à-vis the means of one's salvation. Rather, admittance to God's eternal kingdom hinged on one's commitment to bettering the human species, especially its

poorest classes. Saint-Simon's gospel, which he called *Nouveau Christianisme*, was social rather than theological: once the "épuration" of Christianity was complete (p. Saint-Simon, 1977, p. 163)—that is, once the religion was freed from its theological fetters and social morality became the principal duty and concern of the believer—Christianity could be employed to check the usurping powers of the nation-state, which placed its own temporal interests above the wellbeing of the human race:

Le Nouveau Christianisme est appelé à faire triompher les principes de la morale générale dans la lutte qui existe entre ces principes et les combinaisons qui ont pour objet d'obtenir un bien particulier au dépens du bien public; cette religion rajeunie est appelée à constituer tous les peuples dans un état de paix permanent, en les liguant tous contre la nation qui voudrait faire son bien particulier aux dépens du bien général de l'espèce humaine... (Saint-Simon, 1977, p. 163)

The argument of *Nouveau Christianisme* is two-fold: on the one hand, utopia requires abandoning the theological perplexities of Christian dogma and replacing them with a straightforward program of social progress and change; on the other hand, treatment of one's fellow man must count more toward salvation than establishing a personal relationship with God. Saint-Simon was at once anti-metaphysical and anti-individualistic: Catholicism had promoted dogma over social justice, while Protestantism had placed one's relationship with God above one's duty to society. Both traditions departed from the message of the Gospel; both were therefore heretical. Though nothing in Houellebecq resembles Saint-Simon's critique of Christian religion's two principal strands, the author's antipathy toward metaphysics and individualism is in keeping with the core principles of Saint-Simon's thought: that concern for metaphysical niceties and individualism hinder, if not the purification of Christianity, at least the broader, more

secular effort to create forms of social organization capable of promoting human happiness on a systematic basis.

Both Houellebecq and Saint-Simon trace the rise of modern individualism to the decline of Christianity at the beginning of the modern period. The similarities between the two passages below are as striking as they are unexpected:

Depuis l'établissement du Christianisme jusqu'au quinzième siècle, l'espèce humaine s'est principalement occupée de la coordination de ses sentiments généraux... Pendant toute cette période, les observations directes sur les intérêts privés, sur les faits particuliers et sur les principes secondaires, ont été négligées, elles ont été décriées dans la masse des esprits, et il s'est formé une opinion prépondérante sur ce point, que les principes secondaires devaient être déduits des faits généraux et d'un principe universel... Depuis la dissolution du pouvoir spirituel européen, résultat de l'insurrection de Luther; depuis le quinzième siècle, l'esprit humain s'est détaché des vues les plus générales: il s'est livré aux spécialités, il s'est occupé de l'analyse des faits particuliers, des intérêts privés des différentes classes de la société; il a travaillé à poser les principes secondaires qui pouvaient servir de base aux différentes branches de connaissances; et, pendant cette seconde période, l'opinion s'était établie que les considérations sur les faits généraux, sur les principes généraux et sur les intérêts généraux de l'espèce humaine, n'étaient que des considérations vagues et métaphysiques, ne pouvant contribuer efficacement aux progrès des lumières et au perfectionnement de la civilisation (Saint-Simon, 1977, pp. 182-183).¹¹⁰

And:

Il est... surprenant de noter que les partisans traditionnels de l'humanisme réagirent par un rejet radical [du projet de Hubczejak]. Même si ces notions nous paraissent difficiles à comprendre, il faut se souvenir de la place centrale qu'occupaient, pour les humains de l'âge matérialiste (c'est-à-dire pendant les quelques siècles qui séparèrent la disparition du christianisme médiéval de la publication des travaux de Djerzinski) les concepts de *liberté individuelle*, de *dignité humaine* et de *progrès*. Le caractère confus et arbitraire de ces notions devait naturellement les empêcher d'avoir la moindre efficacité sociale réelle—c'est ainsi que l'histoire humaine, du XVe au XXe siècle de notre ère, peut

¹¹⁰ Additionally, Saint-Simon writes, "...Un très grand mal est résulté pour la société de l'état d'abandon dans lequel on a laissé, depuis le quinzième siècle, les travaux relatifs à l'étude des faits généraux, des principes généraux et des intérêts généraux. Cet abandon a donné naissance au sentiment d'égoïsme, qui est devenu dominant dans toutes les classes et dans tous les individus" (Saint-Simon, 1977 p. 184).

essentiellement se caractériser comme étant celle d'une dissolution et d'une désagrégation progressives... (Houellebecq, 1998a, pp. 385-386).

Houellebecq's rendering of the phenomenon is admittedly cruder than Saint-Simon's, no doubt in part because of its brooding sarcasm. But the spirit of the insight is the same: that the rights-laden discourse of individualism typical of Western modernity (or the materialist age) is not the product of secular or political developments in the centuries following the medieval period, but rather of changes in the religious landscape of Europe (in Saint-Simon's case, the rise of Protestantism, in Houellebecq's, a more general collapse of religious authority), which have progressively dissolved the social bonds and institutions of Christian civilization. Taken alone, nothing about this insight is particularly original: one can, within reason, describe modernity as the *era of the individual*, and certainly the slow diminution of the Christian Church is implicated in the affair. What is more interesting in Houellebecq and Saint-Simon's comments are rather the two authors' hostility toward this development, their sense that human rights represent either a derisory attempt to replace the legislating power of divine sanction, or, even worse, are a cover for individual interests and the ideological selfishness of the nation-state. Saint-Simon's tone is hopeful—in his time, we are still very much in the revolutionary era—whereas the tenor of Houellebecq's comments is characteristically dour and sardonic. “J'aimerais penser que le moi est une illusion; il n'empêche que c'est une illusion douloureuse,” says Bruno early on in *Les particules élémentaires* (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 85). If Houellebecq is a reactionary, as some have claimed,¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Daniel Lindenberg's 2002 effort *Le rappel à l'ordre : enquête sur les nouveaux réactionnaires* features Houellebecq as the principal “new reactionary” of the French intellectual scene, alongside authors such as Maurice Dantec, Alain Finkelkraut, and Philippe Muray. Critics panned the book for its excessive generality (the differences between the figures cited as reactionaries are considerable), but certain scholars,

his reaction reaches back well beyond the twentieth century, indeed back to the ontological heart of modern individualism, the Cogito. Reaction is too weak a word to describe Bruno's complaint: we are dealing with something akin to a refusal of history, if not simply of human nature.¹¹² Saint-Simon was content to urge a practical, Christian anti-individualism, one dedicated to limiting selfishness at the political and the personal levels; once again, we find Houellebecq radicalizing these reasonable views, with the result being that little recourse is left to the author's characters, or to readers who wish to fashion something useful out of the Houellebecquian critique of modernity.

Houellebecq and Saint-Simon also share a like-minded suspicion of metaphysics,¹¹³ in the latter's case for its link to theology and ecclesiastical obscurantism, in the former's for its connection to mind-body materialism.¹¹⁴ Saint-Simon preached that the only sure path to salvation was service to humanity's most downtrodden classes; thus, he presented his doctrine as

...appelée... à prononcer l'anathème sur la théologie, et à classer comme impie toute doctrine ayant pour objet d'enseigner aux hommes d'autres moyens pour obtenir la vie éternelle que celui de travailler de tout leur

such as van Wesemael (2005b, p. 89), have nonetheless openly identified Houellebecq as a reactionary. Houellebecq has denied such charges (Houellebecq, 2008, p 118-119).

¹¹² On a similar note, Daniel in *La possibilité d'une île* opines, "Il n'y a pas d'amour dans la liberté individuelle, dans l'indépendance, c'est tout simplement un mensonge, et l'un des plus grossiers qui se puisse concevoir ; il n'y a d'amour que dans le désir d'anéantissement, de fusion, de disparition individuelle, dans une sorte comme on disait autrefois de *sentiment océanique*, dans quelque chose de toute façon qui était, au moins dans un futur proche, condamné" (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 412). Daniel is in favor of a kind of lived extinction—something perhaps similar to the disappearance of the ego in mystical states—but which is sexual in its origin, and in any case passing. Houellebecq is toying with another temporal, materialistic, and secular solution to a problem religion had previously been able to solve with much greater success: the self's desire to join with its God in a state of eternal bliss. We can congratulate the author for understanding the extent of the problem, though as always it is necessary to pity him for the paltriness of his solutions.

¹¹³ I am using the word *metaphysics* here in the broadest and most elementary sense. From the positivist/Houellebecquian stance, the term refers to that which is not subject to empirical verification; in Saint-Simon's case, the sense of the word is even more basic, denoting speculation unrelated to any material proof. However, it seems unlikely Saint-Simon would have been opposed to metaphysics if not for the latter's link to clerical obscurantism; for Houellebecq, the condemnation of metaphysics is one of principle, since it is an entire epistemological scheme that is being called into question.

¹¹⁴ Here I refer the reader back to Houellebecq's comments on this matter presented in chapter one.

pouvoir à l'amélioration de l'existence de leurs semblables (Saint-Simon, 1977, p. 154).

For Saint-Simon, the science of theology was “la plus importante de toutes pour les clergés hérétiques, attendu qu'elle leur fournit le moyen de fixer l'attention des fidèles sur des minuties” (Saint-Simon, 1977, p. 126), while the real, practical moral duty of the Christian lay in executing the demands of a purely social gospel. Houellebecq's rejection of materialism has nothing specific in common with Saint-Simon's distaste for theology, but the author does recruit the anti-metaphysical stance of positivism in order to argue (failingly, as I suggested in chapter two) against mind-body materialism. In Saint-Simon's case, theology stood in the way of an honest appraisal and implementation of the real goals of Christian religion; in Houellebecq's case, the metaphysics of materialism stand in the way of legitimate assessment of human ontology, and by implication the scientific measures necessary to improve it.

Fourier and Saint-Simon conceived of their utopias along religious lines, and their various prescriptions for social progress and reorganization were accompanied by a clear sense that such work reflected God's will for His creation. For Fourier, human relationships were to be harmonized according to the laws of passionate attraction that God had set forth in His design of the universe; for Saint-Simon, the improvement of the condition of the poor required maintaining allegiance to the original intent of the Gospel and focusing Christianity on social justice rather than on theological abstractions. However much Houellebecq is able to follow these two thinkers in their worries over capitalism and metaphysics, their celebration of female nature, or their critique of individualism, he obviously cannot, unlike Fourier and Saint-Simon, attach his own

utopian program to the will of a Creator God.¹¹⁵ Houellebecq is unable to *theodice* his utopia: his atheism, his materialism, and his anti-historicism forbid him from doing so, even if his accomplishment in fiction provides its own reward. It is thus in Comte, whose thought shares so much in common with his utopian predecessors, yet whose atheism represents an evolution toward the secular socialism of Marxism, that Houellebecq finds his clearest ally.

Auguste Comte. Theologically speaking, Auguste Comte's utopian program is much more modest than what we find in Fourier and Saint-Simon. Comte dismissed materialism from an epistemological point of view—on his account, the question of the nature of the mental, of its substantiality and relation to the physical world, was irreducibly metaphysical and thus not amenable to the rigorous empirical verification that positivism demanded. Yet he very candidly rejected any talk of personal immortality and survival of bodily death, referring to such belief as “puerile illusions.” Comte's elevation of the social over the personal, which he referred to as the “*prépondérance sacrée de la sociabilité sur la personnalité*” (Comte, 1968b, p. 330), relied on the anti-metaphysical epistemology of positivism, which allowed Comte to overcome metaphysical assertions that proclaimed the self-contained nature of human identity and its necessary restriction to a finite physical form. Comte's anti-materialism was thus a tool aimed at fracturing the atomizing barriers built up by individualism; such a stance has little to do with current

¹¹⁵ To be sure, as an author, Houellebecq is under no obligation to produce a rigorous and intellectually viable program of social reform. He has the luxury of being able to aestheticize the views of figures such as Saint-Simon and Comte, while the latter two sought only to be taken seriously. A precedent exists for socially engaged literature in the persons of Camus and Sartre, but whether Houellebecq falls into that camp is up for discussion. Quite a lot of pages could be written on Houellebecq's ambiguous status as an “engaged intellectual,” though unfortunately I cannot discuss the matter here.

debates among philosophers and theologians about materialism, in which the question of personal survival of bodily death is a principal concern.

Houellebecq shares Comte's hostility to metaphysics and to monotheism, but he is quick to point out the fundamental flaw in Comte's system: the assumption that the "faculté de prolonger librement notre vie dans le passé et dans l'avenir" (Comte, 1968b, p. 347) can be expected to constitute a legitimate "dédommagement nécessaire des puérides illusions que nous avons irrévocablement perdues" (1968b, p. 347). Abstract forms of immortality are non-starters where religion is concerned. Believing that a person's being is preserved in the memory of a community may be a comforting proposition for those who are still alive, but the result of death—personal extinction—remains the same as it would be in the mind of the most convinced atheist. The trouble with Comte's abstract conception of immortality is that, as Houellebecq puts it rosily, *no one gives a shit* (tout le monde s'en fout) (Houellebecq, 2008, p. 177). Religion without the promise of immortality is like a marriage without sex, and Comte errs grievously in underestimating man's natural desire for eternal life. Houellebecq writes,

...Comte, j'y insiste, a échoué; il a radicalement et lamentablement échoué.

Une religion sans Dieu est peut-être possible... Mais rien de tout cela ne me paraît envisageable sans une croyance à la vie éternelle; cette croyance qui constitue, pour toutes les religions monothéistes, un fantastique *produit d'appel*; parce qu'une fois cela admis, tout paraît possible; et qu'aucun sacrifice ne paraît, au regard d'un tel objectif, trop lourd...

Comte ne proposait rien de ce genre; il proposait une survie théorique dans la mémoire des hommes. Il donnait à la chose un tour plus ronflant, genre « incorporation au Grand-Être », il n'empêche que c'est bien cela dont il s'agissait, une survie théorique dans la mémoire des hommes. Eh bien cela n'a pas suffi (Houellebecq, 2008, p. 177).

In Houellebecq's view, the success of any future religion depends on technology's ability to create immortality *in vitro*, so to speak. Anyone who believes, as Comte did, that a religion may be founded on an abstract notion of immortality is guilty of egregious naiveté, to which the failure of the philosopher's Religion of Man is a clear testament. In virtually every other respect, however, from the verdict on monotheism, to women's role in society, to the question of rights, Houellebecq follows Comte to the letter.¹¹⁶ The question of eternity is the only point of true contention, and it is indeed a fruitful one: for it is precisely this disagreement that leads Houellebecq, as we saw in chapter four, to propose a religion in which immortality becomes the domain of scientific innovation.

Monotheism, in Comte's view, was nothing less than social poison. Not only did it represent the vestiges "du théologisme initial" (the primitive worldview of both the pre-positive and pre-metaphysical eras) (Comte, 1968b, p. 330), but monotheism's continuing influence also directly impeded progress. Comte was unsparing in his condemnation:

Leur Dieu est devenu le chef nominal d'une conspiration hypocrite, désormais plus ridicule qu'odieuse, qui s'efforce de détourner le peuple de toutes les grandes améliorations sociales en lui prêchant une chimérique compensation, déjà discréditée auprès des prolétaires occidentaux, surtout parisiens. Chaque tendance théologique, catholique, protestante, ou déiste, concourt réellement à prolonger et aggraver l'anarchie morale, en empêchant l'ascendant décisif du sentiment social et de l'esprit d'ensemble, qui seuls peuvent reproduire des convictions fixes et des mœurs prononcées. Il n'y a point maintenant d'utopie subversive qui ne prenne sa base ou sa sanction dans le monothéisme (Comte, 1968b, p. 398).

According to Comte, the monotheistic camp was "rétrograde et anarchique," a domain where "Dieu préside confusément," while the Religion of Humanity, freed at once from

¹¹⁶ George Chabert writes, "...sans parler des fréquentes citations du philosophe français que l'on y trouve, les rapprochements que l'on peut faire entre le récit de Houellebecq et la vie et l'œuvre de Comte sont si nombreux que l'on peut sans excès taxer *Les particules élémentaires* de premier roman comtien" (Chabert, 2002, p. 188).

all theological fetters and vain talk of “compensation chimérique” (i.e. eternal life) was “organique et progressif, systématiquement dévoué à l’Humanité” (Comte, 1968b, p. 398). We have already seen in previous chapters to what extent Houellebecq mirrors Comte on certain of these points. From his declaration in *Lire* that monotheism is the “fait d’un crétin” and that “même si on est con” we eventually realize that God does not exist, to the Egyptian biochemist’s infamous rant against Islam in *Plateforme*, Houellebecq’s hostility to monotheism is as beholden to Comte as his pessimism is to Schopenhauer. The only distinction to be made between the two authors is that Houellebecq, however much he may denigrate the notion of the One God in certain of his comments, nevertheless laments His absence in other places; while Comte, caught up as he was in the ideological fervor surrounding the birth of socialism, unambiguously celebrated the supposedly incipient demise of monotheism. The difference is not one of conviction but of lived history. Comte finds himself in the midst of the revolutionary period, and Houellebecq well past the end of it. The two stand at opposite ends of the same historical spectrum, the one hopeful, the other in despair. Houellebecq at least has the ability to create his own revolutions in his novels, since his dual careers as fiction writer and social commentator afford him multiple possibilities (as was the case for Rousseau, Voltaire, Camus, Sartre and others). In this respect, Houellebecq’s foiled engagement with utopianism is presumably not as devastating as it would have been for his forebear, who never lived to see his ideas fail.

Comte also informs much of Houellebecq’s discussion of rights. The notion of rights, for Comte, was a theological construct whose only basis lay in divine will;¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ “Il ne peut exister de droits véritables, qu’autant que les pouvoirs réguliers émanèrent de volontés surnaturelles” (Comte, 1968b, p. 361).

without a creator God to sanction them, rights were no more than a wobbly human conception, subject to the whim of history and human preference—what the author called “les volontés arbitraires” (Comte, 1968b, p. 368). In the place of rights, the concept of which Comte considered “immorale et anarchique” (Comte, 1968b, p. 361), the philosopher proclaimed that “dans l’état positif, qui n’admet plus de titres célestes, l’idée de droit disparaît irrévocablement. Chacun a ses devoirs, et envers tous; mais personne n’a aucun droit” (Comte, 1968b, p. 361). Comte even went on to assert, perhaps somewhat mockingly, that “nul ne possède plus d’autre droit que celui de toujours faire son devoir” (Comte, 1968b, p. 361).

Treatment of rights in Houellebecq’s work follows in the same spirit. In addition to the closing comments of *Les particules élémentaires*, in which the clone-narrator describes such concepts as individual liberty and human dignity as “confused and arbitrary,” we also find the Sœur Suprême of *Possibilité*, supposedly another clone, dismissing the notion of rights as a simplistic illusion. She states,

Admettre que les hommes n’ont ni dignité, ni droits; que le bien et le mal sont des notions simples, des formes à peine théorisées du plaisir et de la douleur.

Traiter en tout les hommes comme des animaux—méritant compréhension et pitié, pour leurs âmes et pour leurs corps.

Demeurez dans cette voie noble, excellente (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 43).

Daniell shares the Supreme Sister’s thoughts on this point, though his formulation is somewhat more vulgar: “Quant aux *droits de l’homme*, bien évidemment, je n’en avais rien à foutre; c’est à peine si je parvenais à m’intéresser aux droits de ma queue” (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 24). Houellebecq himself appears to take a more nuanced view: in his discussion in *Ennemis publics* of the Tibetan resistance, for instance, the author is

unequivocal about his belief in “la loi morale” (“la loi morale a des mains, et des mains puissantes” [Houellebecq, 2008, p. 117]), and in *Les particules élémentaires* the narrator tells us of the young Djersinzki,

La lecture de Nietzsche ne provoqua en lui qu’un agacement bref, celle de Kant ne fit que confirmer ce qu’il savait déjà. La pure morale est unique et universelle. Elle ne subit aucune altération au cours du temps, non plus qu’aucune adjonction. Elle ne dépend d’aucun facteur historique, économique, sociologique ou culturel; elle ne dépend d’absolument rien du tout. Non déterminée, elle détermine. Non conditionnée, elle conditionne. En d’autres termes, c’est un absolu (Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 46).

To be sure, Comte also believed firmly in a moral law, though in his case morality was to be derived rationally rather than theologically: “La supériorité nécessaire de la morale démontrée sur la morale révélée se résume donc par la substitution finale de l’amour de l’Humanité à l’amour de Dieu” (Comte, 1968b, p. 356). Whether a moral law can exist outside the scope of a sanctioning will, divine or otherwise, is, of course, anyone’s guess, as is the question of whether morality can be *derived* through the employment of reason. It will not, in any event, be necessary to ask Houellebecq and Comte to explain themselves on this point. Suffice it to say that in the historical context of French republicanism, at the foundation of which lies a clear and unequivocal discourse of human rights (*les droits de l’homme et du citoyen*), it may become all too tempting for authors such as Houellebecq and Comte to identify in such a discourse a cover for egotism and revolutionary excess—in other words, an insistence on rights without any regard for *responsibility* or *duty* (even if the concept of *fraternité* seems to suggest a link between the two).¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ There may be, admittedly, something vaguely fascist about such a point of view; Sartre writes in *L’existentialisme est un humanisme* that “Le culte de l’humanité aboutit à l’humanisme fermé sur soi de Comte, et, il faut le dire, au fascisme” (Sartre, 1965, p. 92). Clearly, however, Houellebecq, whatever

Finally, Comte and Houellebecq are characteristically in agreement concerning women and “female nature.” Where the latter declares (as we saw in the section on Fourier) that “il m’apparaît souhaitable de revenir à une société matriarcale,” Comte writes of women,

Ce sexe est certainement supérieur au nôtre quant à l’attribut le plus fondamental de l’espèce humaine, la tendance à faire prévaloir la sociabilité sur la personnalité. À ce titre moral, indépendant de toute destination matérielle, il mérite notre tendre vénération, comme le type le plus pur et le plus direct de l’Humanité, qu’aucun emblème ne représentera dignement sous forme masculine (Comte, 1968b, p. 210).

Houellebecq, who claims that his mother’s derelict parenting forms the “faillite psychique fondamentale” of his mental life (Houellebecq, 2005b), is in a unique psychological position to be sensitive to the Comtian viewpoint on female nature. Such a perspective contains, evidently, its share of sexism—or at the very least a consignment of trite stereotypes relating to motherhood—but from the perspective of biographical detail we ought to be gentle with the author on this point.¹¹⁹ Houellebecq’s feelings about women apparently stem not from some inexcusable cynicism learned as an adult, but from a real psychological wound suffered at childhood. As Bruno Viard writes, “La blessure houellebecquienne originelle est en réalité la privation de participation à la vie commune, le sentiment d’exil et de déréliction ontologique. À cela l’auteur assigne deux causes bien coordonnées l’une à l’autre: la mauvaise mère à échelle psychologique, l’individualisme à échelle sociologique” (Viard, 2007, pp. 68-69). Houellebecquian sexism is nothing

opinion he holds about the concept of rights, and whatever the *ideological implications* of such a point of view might be, is a great admirer of the universal, Kantian conception of morality, which forbids the treatment of any human being as a *means*. Houellebecq’s detractors may assail him for his cynicism and morbidity, but any further censure only demonstrates that they have either read him poorly, have not read his *maîtres à penser*, or, worse, that they have not read him at all.

¹¹⁹ For those who are not familiar with the author’s biography, Houellebecq was abandoned by his mother around age five and sent to live with grandparents in Algeria. His depiction of Lucie Ceccaldi in *Les particules élémentaires*, the useless hippie mother of Bruno and Michel, is an exaggerated but not completely inaccurate description of Houellebecq’s relationship with his mother.

more than the cry (though admittedly a very galling cry) of an abandoned child. That he attaches himself to the quaint maternalism of Comte, Fourier, and Saint-Simon is at least evidence that he cares enough about his own psychological health to make something meaningful out of his grief.

Many other domains exist in which Comte's and Houellebecq's thought follow each other closely, to the point where one could quite literally write an entire book on the latter's intellectual debt to the former. More generally, however, the greatest commonality between the two thinkers is their sense of historical narrative (in the case of Houellebecq as we encounter it explicitly in *Les particules élémentaires*, and more implicitly in other works), which identifies the decline of Christianity as the central event of western modernity. George Chabert writes,

Quelle est donc l'implication immédiate de la mise en question du christianisme? C'est là même le sujet principal du récit de Houellebecq, d'où le titre *Les particules élémentaires*. Voici comme tout cela s'enchaîne au fil des siècles: les philosophes des Lumières portent un coup fatal au christianisme en crise, et remplacent les valeurs chrétiennes par des valeurs ponctuelles telles que la liberté et l'égalité de principe. La valeur de l'homme, désormais circonscrite dans sa personne, le délie des liens sociaux contraignants, facilitant ainsi la substitution d'une économie basée sur la terre par une économie capitaliste. Les droits de l'homme, formule révéérée encore de nos jours qui justifie tout et son contraire, ne seraient ainsi qu'une ruse de l'histoire. Avec le développement de la société libérale, l'homme se percevra de plus en plus puissamment comme une *particule élémentaire* (Chabert, 2002, pp. 194-195).

Comte had been naïve to think that the Religion of Humanity could take the place of Christianity in so short a time (or that it ever could, for that matter). Today, French churches continue to service a Catholic clientele¹²⁰ (albeit a small and dwindling one) and still no serious option for replacing Christianity, besides Islam, has been suggested to

¹²⁰ An exception in this respect would be African immigrants, along with foreigners more generally, who often constitute the bulk of attendees (beyond tourists).

French society at large.¹²¹ In France, laical ideology and secularizing legislation allow religion little breathing room in the public sphere, oftentimes creating the impression of a religious vacuum. On this account, Houellebecq is able to “reprendre dans ses grandes lignes le diagnostic comtien pour décrire la nature du monde libéral au milieu duquel nous vivons toujours” (Chabert, 2002, p. 191), a world where the absence of spirit has created a culture of mass hedonism, and where sex and material consumption have replaced piety and obedience to divine will as the unquestionable good.

Nevertheless, Houellebecq can only follow Comte and his nineteenth-century cohort so far: for the fervor surrounding these thinkers’ religious or quasi-religious utopianism has vanished in the wake of the twentieth century’s great ideological catastrophes. While Houellebecq may share Comte’s diagnosis of western malaise, the hope and excitement that fueled the utopian movements of the nineteenth century are absolutely unavailable to him.¹²² This irreconcilable difference is captured in a memorable scene from *La carte et le territoire*, during which Jed Martin notes the contents of Houellebecq’s personal library:

Ils retournèrent dans la salle de séjour pour prendre le café. Houellebecq rajouta deux bûches dans le feu, puis partit s’affairer dans la cuisine. Jed se plongea dans l’examen de la bibliothèque, fut surpris par le petit nombre de romans—des classiques essentiellement. Il y avait par contre un nombre étonnant d’ouvrages dus aux réformateurs sociaux du XIXe

¹²¹ “On le sait depuis, si l’analyse d’Auguste Comte garde tout son intérêt, ses prévisions sur l’éminent avènement de l’âge positif ont pêché par optimisme. « Je suis persuadé que, avant l’année 1860, je prêcherai le positivisme à Notre Dame, comme la seule religion réelle et complète », écrivait le philosophe en 1851, or, de nos jours encore la vénérable cathédrale continue à célébrer des rituels d’un autre âge” (Chabert, 2002, p. 191).

¹²² On a more political note, Mike Gane writes, “...for over fifty years there has now emerged in Europe a sense that the oscillations of the revolutionary period are over. Parliamentary democracies seem to have established themselves as fairly stable structures lodged in the European Union. These are not based on and do not derive their legitimacy from science, or social science. The sciences themselves have not formed themselves into a system of knowledge with sociology at the apex, and social philosophy no longer sees itself as playing the role of harmonizing knowledge into a coherent system. Yet Comte was insistent that the scientific enterprise is a single interdependent whole, and is understood as a driving force of the revolution of modern civilization” (Gane, 2006, p. 11).

siècle: les plus connus, comme Marx, Proudhon, et Comte ; mais aussi Fourier, Cabet, Saint-Simon, Pierre Leroux, Owen, Carlyle, ainsi que d'autres qui ne lui évoquaient à peu près rien (Houellebecq, 2010a, p. 259).

All the great utopian tomes sit peacefully on their shelves, no longer of the slightest utility or interest to contemporary man. Houellebecq has read them all, admired them, and, in the end, consigned them to the cruel verdict of history. As the fictional Houellebecq confesses to Jed, “Vous savez ce qu’affirme Comte... que l’humanité est composée de davantage de morts que de vivants. Eh bien, j’en suis là, maintenant, je suis surtout en contact avec des morts” (Houellebecq, 2010a, p. 259). The quest for man’s salvation in the absence of God is finished. All that remains is to resign oneself to suffering, death, and nothingness. The cynicism and horror of such a worldview cannot be overstated.

For the last section of this chapter, I would like to perform an experiment: attempt to remedy the seemingly insoluble dilemma that Houellebecq presents in his work, without sinning *excessively* against the author’s disbelief. The victims of the *univers houellebecquien* are crying out for relief, as are we who take the author’s work seriously. The following comments may therefore seem *strange*; but the logic of Houellebecq’s system leads inexorably to certain considerations—religious, spiritual, philosophical, or otherwise—and it would be dishonest not to give a fair account of them.

Spiritism and Rational Religion

If anything can be said to be typical of the programmatic utopias of Fourier, Saint-Simon, and Comte, it is their utter and remarkable failure over the long term. Saint-Simonianism expired not long after the death of its leader; the remainder of the

sect, led by Barthélemy Prosper Enfantin, was banned in 1832, with the stragglers departing for North Africa and the Middle East in search of new converts. Fourier's influence was less marginal, especially from an intellectual and political point of view, given the author's affinities with Marxism.¹²³ But the Fourierist movements that appeared in North America in the mid-nineteenth century, most memorably Brook Farm and the Alphadelphia Association, were some of the more short-lived curiosities of the Second Great Awakening, and what structures remain from those communities are monuments to a forgotten age. Finally, though positivism held some sway in Brazil after the overthrow of the monarchy in 1889, its vestiges linger only in the motto of the Brazilian flag: *Ordem e Progresso*. What accounts for the failure of these utopian movements? Why were they so fleeting, while the traditional religions—religions that are decidedly more theological, more primitive, and less explicitly social—retain much, if not most, of their former prestige?

The attempts of Fourier, Saint-Simon, and Comte to reform society on religious terms were part of a broader movement to *rationalize religion*—that is, to make it consonant with the scientific knowledge and the social needs of the day. Fourier's system included a virulent reproach of capitalism, and his discourse of "attraction" was clearly linked, however haphazardly, to mechanical principles that had emerged with the birth of modern physics. Saint-Simon and Comte identified theology with social and political corruption and saw it as the product of a primitive, pre-rational age. Whatever the merit of these judgments, they reflected a broad intuition, borne out of the deism of the Enlightenment, that religious knowledge needed to be made consonant with scientific,

¹²³ In 1947, André Breton, famed surrealist and popularizer of "black humor," published *Ode à Charles Fourier*.

philosophical, and other epistemological advances that had occurred in the modern period. Yet it was precisely this concern with modernization that likely doomed these utopian movements. Fourierism was simply too arcane in its theological posits, and the focus on social organization that the system called for was nothing if not demanding; Saint-Simon's social gospel required too much of its adherents in the way of charity and gave virtually nothing in the way of spirituality—eternal life was promised to those who served the poor, but beyond this there was no discussion of otherworldly matters; and Comte, as Houellebecq points out, erred in assuming abstract immortality in human memory was a satisfactory replacement for the real, personal immortality promised by the monotheistic and other world religions. Evidently, such figurative immortality failed to inspire a sufficient number of devotees. In short, the nineteenth-century utopians *asked too much* of people, without giving them a sense of what they stood to gain, just as armies tend to lose wars when soldiers and commanders lack a clear understanding of the objective. The failure of these attempts at rational religion—attempts to *improve* religion, by making it less obscure and more socially responsible—are perhaps a sad commentary on human selfishness; but they do increase our awareness of what sorts of religious and spiritual thought inspires belief, as well as a sense of what level of success to expect from future religious movements.

The utopian discourses we encounter in Houellebecq's work (most notably in *Les particules élémentaires* and *La possibilité d'une île*, though also to some degree in the sexual utopia of *Plateforme*) can be assigned a place, though with nearly two hundred years of hindsight, within the effort, typical of the French utopian socialists, to elaborate a rational system of religious belief. With this hindsight, however, Houellebecq is forced

to take a markedly different tack in his presentation, and it is no surprise that at the end of *La possibilité d'une île*—a novel to be read in many respects as the sequel to *Les particules élémentaires*—Houellebecq realizes, as Fourier, Saint-Simon, and Comte could not, the futility and error of his utopian program. Let us recall the glowing terms in which the narrator of *Les particules élémentaires* describes the clone society we encounter at novel's end: the neo-humans, having conquered egotism, cruelty, and anger, and are no longer tortured by individual vanity and live the lives of gods in the eyes of their human predecessors (Houellebecq, 1998a, pp. 393-394). Humanity as we know it has disappeared, but Houellebecq leads us to believe that this in fact constitutes a happy ending. In *Plateforme*, however, the robust utopianism of the former novel begins to wane. The sexual utopia of *Eldorado Aphrodite* is literally blown to bits by Islamic terrorists, and Michel's lover, Valérie, dies in the attack. Inconsolably bereaved in the wake of this personal apocalypse, Michel simply awaits death. Subsequently, in *La possibilité d'une île*, we bear witness to the decline of the neo-human Elohimites, who, having isolated themselves from each other in anticipation of the coming of the Future Ones, begin to defect from their compounds in search of “une hypothétique communauté néo-humaine” (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 424). Soon after leaving Proyecciones XXI,13, Daniel25 remarks,

Je dormis très mal; mon entreprise m'apparaissait de plus en plus nettement déraisonnable, et vouée à un échec certain. Je n'avais pourtant aucun regret; j'aurais d'ailleurs parfaitement pu rebrousser chemin, aucun contrôle n'était exercé par la Cité centrale... Je pouvais revenir, mais je n'en avais pas envie: cette routine solitaire, uniquement entrecoupée d'échanges intellectuels, qui avait constitué ma vie, qui aurait dû la constituer jusqu'au bout, m'apparaissait à présent insoutenable. Le bonheur aurait dû venir, le bonheur des enfants sages, garanti par le respect des petites procédures, par la sécurité qui en découlait, par l'absence de douleur et de risque; mais le bonheur n'était pas venu, et

l'équanimité avait conduit à l'échec... Signe le plus patent de l'échec, j'en étais venu sur la fin à envier la destinée de Daniel1, son parcours contradictoire et violent, les passions amoureuses qui l'avaient agité—quelles qu'aient pu être ses souffrances, et sa fin tragique au bout du compte (Houellebecq, 2005a, pp. 429-430).

Unlike preceding clones, Daniel25 recognizes the pointlessness of his existence on the compound and chooses to abandon a life of asceticism for which there is no foreseeable pay-off. Having studied the *récit de vie* of Daniel1, he concludes that he would rather suffer the misery and despair of his forebear than endure the absurd life of a neo-human clone. Thus, aware of the dangers of departure but unwilling to return to his previous solitude, he sets out in search of a neo-human community rumored to exist on Lanzarote, the birthplace of the Elohimite faith.

In the end, however, Daniel25 balks. Having reached the sea after an exhausting and nearly fatal journey across the “Grand Espace Gris” (a flat, featureless desert that was once the ocean floor) Daniel25, “intérieurement desséché” (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 472), reasons that neither human nor neo-human life promises any possibility of happiness. “Prisonnière des conditions aux limites imposées par les lois de la thermodynamique, la vie organique ne pourrait de toute façon si elle venait à renaître que répéter les mêmes schémas: constitution d'individus isolés, prédation, transmission sélective du code génétique; rien de nouveau ne pouvait en être attendu” (Houellebecq, 2005a, pp. 471-472). So long as organic life exists, happiness is impossible, hence the neo-humans' desire to transform themselves into sorts of biological machines, as impervious to suffering as they are to joy. Ultimately, however, biology is to have the last word:

La vie des hommes avait été... placée sous la domination de la souffrance, avec de brefs instant de plaisir liés à la conscientisation de l'instinct,

devenu désir dans l'espèce humaine. Celle des néo-humains se voulait apaisée, rationnelle, éloignée du plaisir comme de la souffrance, et mon départ était là pour témoigner de son échec (Houellebecq, 2005a, pp. 464-465).

Embodiment (especially of the carbon-based kind) pushes inexorably toward desire and separation, and so long as we remain corporeal beings, happiness eludes us. No wonder, then, that Daniel25 decides to live out the rest of his “obscure existence de singe amélioré” as a kind of overgrown amoeba, content to laze thoughtlessly in pools of salt water as his genetically modified organism imbibes nutrients (Houellebecq, 2005a, pp. 469-470).

Between desire and sorrow, community and solitude, existence and non-existence, Daniel25, “inaccessible à l'ennui” (Houellebecq, 2005a, p. 471), is able to carve out a narrow space in which his organic functions can persist, a kind of permanent bestial stupefaction, impermeable to thought. One finds it difficult to say which of Houellebecq's solutions to existential malaise is more dismal, Daniel25's *abrutissement* or humanity's disappearance. In the latter case we are spared the ideological queasiness associated with posthumanism; but in the former case we see Houellebecq indulging in a kind of *pre-humanism*, a return to animal brutishness and insensibility, whose outcome would hardly be more favorable.

One of Houellebecq's great curiosities as a novelist is that he appears so *bothered* by the existential impasses he presents. One can, presumably, be an atheist and be happier than Michel Houellebecq, but the author seems fundamentally unable to come to terms with the *aporia* of his worldview. Thus the reader is led along a path of wrenching and lugubrious conclusions before being slammed head first into the philosophical roadblock that Houellebecq has set out in advance. The author possesses the existential

sensibility of a novelist such as Tolstoy: a deep sense of the ultimate pointlessness of an existence in which life ends in extinction, and in which the universe demands nothing of its inhabitants. Houellebecq is plagued by this awareness: whereas others might find respite (or distraction) in political engagement, family, activism, or whatever other pursuits go to fill a life, he is unable to excavate his being from the despair that his philosophical assumptions have induced. Is he a fool in this respect? Is it reasonable, or even sane, to be so ruffled by the perspective that God does not exist, that no life awaits us beyond death, and that existence is, strictly speaking, without meaning? Readers will answer as they please, but the most brilliant and creative minds of the past—such as Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Sartre, even Woody Allen—were and have been preoccupied by the very same questions, and to pretend that such dilemmas are not of crucial importance individually and socially is simply to fall prey to the very consumer society that Houellebecq so decries. Houellebecq raises a standard that most would prefer not recognize. If we loathe him, it is precisely for this, and all the recrimination against the author for his political insensitivity is a cover for a more profound, more disturbing, and frankly more embarrassing unease—that of the modern, liberal, and materialistic soul confronted with the hollowness of its valiantly chanted slogans.

But now let us go beyond Houellebecq. However much the author reasons along the lines of his religious utopian forebears—that is, however much he may recognize religion as the pivot on which any healthy society swings—by the end of *La possibilité d'une île* we find that the aspirations of these thinkers, and especially those of Comte, have been cruelly discarded, and that more than anything Houellebecq has come to a very Schopenhauerian conclusion: that human life must be some kind of mistake, and that it

would have been much better if the world had not existed in the first place.¹²⁴ This mentality persists in *La Carte et le Territoire*, a novel in which the utopianism of Houellebecq's previous efforts is virtually absent. In Houellebecq's fifth novel, France is able to survive successive waves of economic crisis by abandoning industrialism and concentrating its economy on tourism. As urbanites move to the countryside to set up restaurants and artisan trades, the problems linked to immigration decline, as does immigration *tout court*, and a de-multiculturalized French society returns to its "traditional" values:

Cette nouvelle génération se montrait davantage conservatrice, davantage respectueuse de l'argent et des hiérarchies sociales établies que toutes celles qui l'avaient précédée. De manière surprenante, le taux de natalité était cette fois effectivement remonté en France, même sans tenir compte de l'immigration, qui était de toute façon tombée à zéro depuis la disparition des derniers emplois industriels et la réduction drastique des mesures de protection sociale intervenue au début des années 2020 (Houellebecq, 2010a, p. 417).

This is more the fantasy world of Jean-Marie Le Pen and the Front National than it is idyllic utopia. Houellebecq appears to be mocking the ecological pretensions of José Bové and other figures on the "green" left by injecting a trace of fascism into an ecological discourse usually perceived as *de gauche*. There is nothing of the nineteenth century here, still less of socialism or God, and certainly Houellebecq's description of Jed Martin's art in the novel's last paragraph punctuates the narrative with a sense of apocalypse:

L'œuvre qui occupa les dernières années de la vie de Jed Martin peut ainsi être vue—c'est l'interprétation la plus immédiate—comme une méditation nostalgique sur la fin de l'âge industriel en Europe, et plus généralement sur le caractère périssable et transitoire de toute industrie humaine. Cette interprétation est cependant insuffisante à rendre compte du malaise qui nous saisit à voir ces pathétiques petites figurines du type Playmobil,

¹²⁴ See Schopenhauer, 2006, pp. 16, 23.

perdues au milieu d'une cité futuriste abstraite et immense, cité qui elle-même s'effrite et se dissocie, puis semble peu à peu s'éparpiller dans l'immensité végétale qui s'étend à l'infini. Ce sentiment de désolation, aussi, qui s'empare de nous à mesure que les représentations des êtres humains qui avaient accompagné Jed Martin au cours de sa vie terrestre se délitent sous l'effet des intempéries, puis se décomposent et partent en lambeaux, semblent dans les dernières vidéos se faire le symbole de l'anéantissement généralisé de l'espèce humaine (Houellebecq, 2010a, p. 428).

The feeling of extinction in this final passage is enough to darken the spirits of even the most hardened Houellebecq aficionado. With no utopian prospects to guide him, we wonder if Houellebecq is not finally at the end of his creative rope.

Little does Houellebecq realize, however, that the very nineteenth century that his thought appears to have exhausted offers much more than the failed utopianisms of Comte, Fourier, and Saint-Simon. More squarely religious and less directly social alternatives to the century's social reformers emerged during this time period, one of the most interesting being *Spiritism*, specifically the spiritist movement that arose from the work of French educator Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail (1804-1869), popularly known by his *nom de plume*, Allan Kardec. The Spiritist doctrine, which preaches reincarnation, the immortality of the soul, and identifies itself as "l'antagoniste le plus redoutable du matérialisme" (Kardec, 2005, p. 449), has the misfortune of having arisen from the nineteenth century's wide interest in mediumship and psychical phenomena (such as the infamous *tables tournantes* that so fascinated Victor Hugo after the death of his daughter, Léopoldine.) As we will see, however, certain of Spiritism's principal claims, whatever their ultimate origins, respond directly to Houellebecq's qualms about religion, and, more importantly, have managed to inspire belief where the efforts of Comte, Fourier, and Saint-Simon failed. For Spiritism is by no means dead. The religion flourishes in

modern-day Brazil,¹²⁵ and small groups and associations of practitioners can be found all across the globe.¹²⁶

Houellebecq's impermeability to religion, an atheism that he describes as "quelque chose de froid, de désespéré, vécu sur le mode de l'incapacité pure; un espace blanc, opaque, dans lequel on avance péniblement, un hiver définitif" (Houellebecq, 2008, p. 174), owes itself in part to his upbringing at the hands of an atheist father.¹²⁷ Yet, on closer inspection, the author's disbelief reveals itself to be just as much the product of his positivist intuitions as it is of his childhood. For instance, he writes,

Le problème est qu'aucune religion actuelle n'est compatible avec l'état général des connaissances; ce qu'il nous faudrait c'est carrément une nouvelle ontologie (cited in Chabert, 2002, p. 192).

Houellebecq explores this "new ontology" in *Les particules élémentaires*, in which Michel Djerzinski prevails upon the anti-metaphysical posture of positivism to elaborate his "quantum solution" to social collapse. The new ontology, however, lacks a spiritual dimension, and by the end of *La possibilité d'une île* the post-human, utopian society of the former novel finds itself in terminal decline. For Houellebecq, the terms "the general state of knowledge" read something like this: science proves religious claims about God and immortality false, and no religion that hopes to succeed can do so if it fails to conceive of immortality in some other terms (hence Houellebecq's preoccupation with the possibility of physical immortality suggested by cloning.) It is here that Spiritism becomes relevant.

¹²⁵ "In Brazil, one finds large Spiritist federations, Spiritist bookstores, a vibrant Spiritist press, famous and highly respected mediums, and clashing ideological tendencies within the movement—pure Kardecists versus Roustaingist and Ubaldist reformers or, more generally, 'scientific' versus 'evangelical' interpretations" (Hess, 1991, p. 202).

¹²⁶ Two such associations are the Allan Kardec Educational Society (AKES), located in Philadelphia (<http://www.allan-kardec.org>), and the Cercle Spirite Allan Kardec, headquartered in Nancy, France (<http://www.spiritisme.com>).

¹²⁷ See Houellebecq (2008), pp. 173-174.

Though by all means an otherworldly religion (the founding concept behind Spiritism is that we occupy a world intersected and permeated by incorporeal spirits, some benevolent and some evil, whose influence on us and on the world, though mostly ignored, in fact determines to a great degree our material reality and is thus sought by practitioners of the religion), Spiritism is unique in its approach to science and other rational forms of inquiry. Allan Kardec, who claimed that his most influential book, *Le livre des esprits*, was only a transcription of spirit communications obtained through a medium,¹²⁸ writes,

La science, loin d'amoindrir l'œuvre divine, nous la montre sous un aspect plus grandiose et plus conforme aux notions que nous avons de la puissance et de la majesté de Dieu, par cela même qu'elle s'est accomplie sans déroger aux lois de la nature (Kardec, 2005, p. 23).

A central aspect of Spiritism—one that perhaps distinguishes it from any other system of religious belief—is the insistence by Kardec and contemporary Spiritists that the world of spirit is part and parcel of the natural order, and that phenomena such as afterlife, spirit communication, and other seemingly transcendental or paranormal occurrences are in fact *natural* occurrences, only of a higher order of subtlety. David J. Hess, a scholar of Spiritism in Brazil, writes,

...the philosophical implications of Kardec's doctrine include the rejection of a number of basic Christian tenets, among them the divinity of Christ, the Trinitarian concept of God, the divine nature of miracles (which Spiritists believe to be natural, psychic phenomena), the existence of angels and demons (only more or less highly evolved spirits), and the physical reality of heaven and hell. As a man of reason, science, and progress, Kardec rejected these ideas as outmoded superstitions (Hess, 1991, p. 17).

¹²⁸ The Prolegomena to the *Livre des esprits* is signed “St. Jean l’Évangéliste, St. Augustin, St. Vincent de Paul, Saint Louis, L’esprit de vérité, Socrate, Platon, Fénelon, Franklin, Swedenbourg, etc., etc.” (Kardec, 1861, XLIII).

Kardec's dogged efforts to present Spiritism as a rational system of belief are remarkable, as they give a sense of the kinds of skepticism he encountered even in the mid-nineteenth century. The conclusion of *Le livre des esprits* is a plea to those who, even today, either attempt to maintain a strict epistemological distinction between scientific and religious knowledge (for instance, Terry Eagleton), and those who see religion as a failed epistemological forebear to science ("Ditchkens"). Kardec writes,

Tous les phénomènes spirites, *sans exception*, sont la conséquence de lois générales; ils nous révèlent une des puissances de la nature, puissance inconnue, ou mieux dire incomprise jusqu'ici, mais que l'observation démontre être dans l'ordre des choses. Le spiritisme repose donc moins sur le merveilleux et le surnaturel que la religion elle-même; ceux qui l'attaquent sous ce rapport, c'est donc qu'ils ne le connaissant pas, et fussent-ils les hommes les plus savants, nous leur dirions : si votre science qui vous a appris tant de choses, ne vous a pas appris que le domaine de la nature est infini, vous n'êtes savants qu'à demi (Kardec, 2005, pp. 450-451).

Kardec believed it was possible, or that it would soon be possible, to place the revelations of the séance on the same pedestal as scientific truth, and that he and his followers would one day prove that "l'existence de ce monde, qui est celui qui nous attend, sera aussi incontestable que celle du monde microscopique et des globes perdus de l'espace" (Kardec, 2005, p. 464). Thus, while Auguste Comte rejected materialism on epistemological grounds, Kardec could claim with confidence that "le spiritisme a tué le matérialisme par les faits" (Kardec, 2005, p. 464, my emphasis). This basic difference in approach likely explains why Comte's Religion of Man met with failure, while Spiritism thrives to this day.

In some respects, Spiritism's attempt to make itself appear more scientific is the product of Kardec's rhetorical flare. It is certainly possible to refer to a soul as a "naturally occurring phenomenon," but such a change in definition does not mean a soul

exists, and the concern then becomes to distinguish that which is natural and unseen from that which is natural and seen. In a word, we are exactly in the same place we began. Furthermore, the movement's reliance on mediumship and the séance to support its "scientific" claims about the next world naturally strikes most contemporary observers as both unacceptable and damning. In order to understand Spiritism's relevance, we must consider the broad intellectual interest in "psychical" approaches to religious and spiritual phenomena typical of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Though these facts are little known to history, many of the most influential psychological figures of the period, including Freud, Jung, Bergson, and James, were professionally interested in psychical phenomena and wrote about them in leading journals.¹²⁹ Conviction among scientists and other thinkers involved in psychical research was that, while traditional religious beliefs could be relegated to the domain of the absurd and the irrational, supernatural phenomena were a part of the natural order of the world, and scientific methods of verification could be brought to bear on them in order to generate a clearer, reasonably verifiable, and *religiously disinterested* view of the otherworldly.¹³⁰ Spiritism

¹²⁹ The history of parapsychology is recounted brilliantly in Alan Gauld's *The Founders of Psychical Research* (1968), which traces the rise of the movement and its founders' (failed) attempts to incorporate parapsychology into mainstream psychology. Classic texts issuing from the movement include F.W.H. Myers' *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (1903) and Arthur Conan Doyle's *The History of Spiritualism, Vol. I & II* (1926). "Spirit-dictated texts," such as Kardec's, include William Stainton Moses' *Spirit Communications* (1883) and Sir Oliver Lodge's *Raymond, or, Life after Death* (1916). Alan Gauld's book focuses on the work of three nineteenth-century Cambridge scholars, the above-mentioned F.W.H. Myers, Henry Sidgwick, and Edward Gurney, though the number of psychologists and other thinkers involved in psychical research during the period was extensive, including contributors from United States, England, and Continental Europe. The most important work done in the field frequently appeared in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* (JSPR), the flagship publication of the Society, which Myers and his colleagues founded in 1882. The journal and society still exist today.

¹³⁰ The thought of Sir Oliver Lodge, a Victorian scientist who was heavily involved in the parapsychology movement, is indicative of the prevailing mentality. Though Lodge believed firmly in God and in the intervention of spiritual forces in the human realm, he was nonetheless appropriately wary of the superstitious nature of traditional religious beliefs. Claiming that "The region of true Religion and the region of a completer Science are one" (Lodge, 1908, p. 47), he also wrote, "It is widely recognized at the present day that the modern spirit of scientific inquiry has in the main exerted a wholesome influence upon Theology, clearing it of much encumbrance of doubtful doctrine, freeing it from slavery to the literal

is a product of this little known (or little acknowledged) cultural fascination with psychical phenomena, and whatever the ultimate nature of its claims may be, its attempt to rationalize religion on empirical grounds, while at the same time *maintaining a belief in immorality and the supernatural*, is easily one of the most intriguing and laudable endeavors of the nineteenth century. It is a pity that Kardec's work, which enjoys great celebrity in contemporary Brazil, is not studied alongside Comte, Fourier, Saint-Simon, and other religious utopians of the period, whose views today inspire virtually no one.¹³¹

When we consider that Houellebecq's principal bone of contention with religion is the apparent absurdity of its metaphysical and theological assertions (the existence of God, of the soul, etc.) we see how a religion such as Spiritism, which bases its religious claims not on individual revelation or speculation but rather on *evidence* (or at least what its practitioners conceive of as evidence), could begin to puncture the steel casing of Houellebecq's skepticism.¹³² When the existence of God is ruled out not by political

accuracy of historical records, and reducing the region of the miraculous or the incredible, with which it used to be almost conterminous, to a comparatively small area" (Lodge, 1908, p. 1). Lodge was convinced that that reconciliation of science and religion was to take place at some point ("But yet there must be an end to it some time; reconciliation is bound to lie somewhere in the future; no two parts or aspects of the Universe can permanently and really be discordant" (Lodge, 1908, p. 24)) and that the supernatural domain was only supernatural so long as scientific inquiry had not yet made sense of it ("Religion may, in fact, be called supernatural or superscientific, if the term 'natural' be limited to that region of which we now believe that we have any direct scientific knowledge" (Lodge, 1908, p. 10).)

¹³¹ Kardec's work was not utopian in nature. While it is easy enough to extract from the work of Comte, Saint-Simon, and Fourier the doctrines' political and social elements, ignoring their religious and spiritual character, in Kardec we find a pronounced resignation to problems of social inequality. The following "conversation" between spirit and medium is indicative: ASKER: "L'égalité des richesses est-elle possible, et a-t-elle jamais existé?" SPIRIT(S): "Non, elle n'est pas possible. La diversité des facultés et des caractères s'y oppose." ASKER: "Il y a pourtant des hommes qui croient que là est le remède aux maux de la société; qu'en pensez-vous?" SPIRIT(S): "Ce sont des systématiques ou des ambitieux jaloux; il ne comprennent pas que l'égalité qu'ils rêvent serait bientôt brisée par la force des choses. Combattez l'égoïsme, c'est là votre plaie sociale, et ne cherchez pas des chimères" (Kardec, 2005, p. 342). Kardec's work is thus of little interest to anyone with broadly Marxist or socialist commitments, since it frankly denies the possibility of material equality.

¹³² A number of fascinating similarities exist between Houellebecq and Spiritism (and between Spiritism and the religious utopians) that space forbids me from mentioning in the main text, but for which I will provide citations here. First, concerning the question of women's role in society, Kardec writes, "La loi humaine, pour être équitable, doit consacrer l'égalité des droits entre l'homme et la femme; tout privilège

commitment, hostility to organized religion, or whatever experiences or convictions may cause a person to sour to religion, but by the mere fact that “the current state of our knowledge” appears to represent an insurmountable challenge to religious claims, the matter becomes, precisely, that of *re-evaluating the state of our knowledge*. After all, it is not as if Houellebecq is hostile to the idea of *being religious*—let us recall that he spent years trying to become a Catholic—and there is every reason to believe that he would welcome another opportunity to do so if it came along. At the very least, a re-evaluation of his theological convictions might spur the author to *write a less depressing novel*. Houellebecq is a person for whom the only possible religion is an *empirical* religion. His thought represents a kind of stalled synthesis of science and faith, and though one finds it difficult to believe that Houellebecq himself should ever overcome his own incredulity, the author nonetheless points in the direction of a necessary evolution in religious thinking. When the materialism of science appears insufferably bleak¹³³ (and along with

accordé à l'un et à l'autre est contraire à la justice. *L'émancipation de la femme suit le progrès de la civilisation* ; son asservissement marche avec la barbarie. Les sexes, d'ailleurs, n'existent que par l'organisation physique ; puisque les Esprits peuvent prendre l'un et l'autre, il n'y a point de différences entre eux sous ce rapport, et par conséquent ils doivent jouir des mêmes droits” (Kardec, 2005, p. 345). Second, the two authors' treatments of materialism strike a similar chord, though unlike Houellebecq Kardec is able to exploit theological concepts in his discussion. We read, “Les peuples qui ne vivent que de la vie du corps, ceux dont la grandeur n'est fondée que sur la force et l'étendue, naissent, croissent, et meurent, parce que la force d'un peuple s'épuise comme celle d'un homme ; ceux dont les lois égoïstes jurent avec le progrès des lumières et la charité meurent, parce que la lumière tue les ténèbres, et la charité tue l'égoïsme” (Kardec, 2005, p. 339). If anything, what such comments demonstrate is that, on the one hand, women's equality was not strictly linked in France to the beginnings of socialism, and that, on the other hand, the discourse of decline that is stereotypical of twentieth-century France—stemming from the two World Wars and the confrontation with globalization and Americanization—is a phenomenon that stretches well back into the nineteenth century, and that appears to be linked (as we see clearly in Houellebecq) not so much to national, political, or economic concerns, but to worries about the social consequences of atheism and materialism.

¹³³ Kardec's condemnation of materialism and materialist society is every bit as potent as what we find in Houellebecq and is reminiscent of similar comments by Robespierre. Kardec writes,

Vous voulez, dites-vous, guérir votre siècle d'une manie qui menace d'envahir le monde ? Aimeriez-vous mieux que le monde fût envahi par l'incredulité que vous cherchez à propager ? n'est-ce pas à l'absence de toute croyance qu'il faut attribuer le relâchement des liens de famille et la plupart des désordres qui minent la société ? En démontrant l'existence et l'immortalité de l'âme, le spiritisme ranime la foi en l'avenir,

it the individualist, consumer society it supports), but the claims of the traditional religions come off as hopelessly unlikely or excessively sentimental, the only real choice for a person eager to move beyond his or her skepticism is to attempt not simply to rationalize but also to empiricize religion—that is, to seek some actual evidence that suggests the existence of a soul, an afterlife, or at the very least some kind of being beyond the corporeal husk.¹³⁴ Despite himself, Houellebecq leads us down the path toward a potential fusion of the empirical and the spiritual. Those most deeply troubled by the author’s portrayal of a post-religious, collapsing modernity can find solace in the fact that many thinkers, not simply Kardec and the Spiritists but a whole host of nineteenth-century intellectuals, whose work has been mostly lost to posterity, were able to continue where Houellebecq either cannot or will not.

Few are those like Houellebecq who require recourse to empirical methods to carve out their parcel of faith. Most of the world remains religious despite science, and the author errs in assuming that his own existential preoccupations reveal broad concerns. Like Tolstoy, one of the nineteenth century’s most tortured souls, Houellebecq (and no doubt many of his characters) might describe his spiritual condition as such:

relève les courages abattus, fait supporter avec résignation les vicissitudes de la vie ; oseriez-vous appeler cela un mal ? Deux doctrines sont en présence : l’une qui nie l’avenir, l’autre qui le proclame et le prouve ; l’une qui n’explique rien, l’autre qui explique tout et par cela même s’adresse à la raison ; l’une est la sanction de l’égoïsme, l’autre donne une base à la justice, à la charité et à l’amour de ses semblables ; la première ne montre que le présent et anéantit toute espérance, la seconde console et montre le vaste champ de l’avenir ; quelle est la plus pernicieuse ? (Kardec, 2005, p. 451)

When we compare the similarity of such statements with those of other thinkers over the span of the history of modern France, it becomes clear that, as Chabert claims above, French critique of materialism and “soullessness” (in the literal sense), as well as of the egotism and social atomization that such a worldview produces, has a direct connection to condemnation of the atheistic excesses of the Revolution. Houellebecq simply continues this tradition into the twenty-first century.

¹³⁴ In 1976, Raymond Moody’s study *Life After Life* renewed in many respects the parapsychological tradition by offering a scientific investigation of the Near-Death Experience (NDE). Since Moody’s book, countless studies have been conducted on the NDE, many of which are published in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Near-Death Studies*. A helpful synopsis of the current state of NDE and psychical research is found in Charles Tart’s 2009 book *The End of Materialism*.

...my life is some kind of stupid and evil practical joke that someone is playing on me. In spite of the fact that I did not acknowledge the existence of any “Someone” who might have created me, the notion that someone brought me into the world as a stupid and evil joke seemed to be the most natural way to describe my condition (Tolstoy, 1983, p. 29).

Admittedly, the great majority of human beings are not at leisure to entertain these sorts of thoughts—or at least not to the degree that they ruminate on them to the point of debility. Houellebecquian existential despair is thus in some respects *une affaire de classe intellectuelle*, the product of an excessive amount of contemplation linked to a naturally morose personality. One has to travel far down the road toward disenchantment to arrive at Houellebecq’s grim outpost, so much so that even the most schmaltzy, feel-good, or frankly absurd kind of religious belief strikes one as a refreshing alternative to the nihilism of Houellebecq’s universe.

However, it would be equally naïve to think that only education and intellectual leisure time permit a person to entertain questions of life, death, eternity, and meaning. Houellebecq is surely right in pointing out that no extant religion is truly able to respond to what science tells us about the natural world. As we have seen, the religious movements that attempted to do so in the nineteenth century have vanished, and though similar attempts in our era are either ignored or have met with scorn (as is the case with intelligent design theory), it would surely be a service to humanity if we could relinquish the mythologies and superstitions of the past while laying the foundations of a future religious worldview that was at once rational, humane, social, and able to meaningfully and effectively confront and accommodate scientific truth. Humanity can certainly go on being Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, etc., with all the problems and conflicts that arise when different groups of people hold dissimilar beliefs; but would it not be better if there

were some minimal consensus on religious truth, or perhaps a new form of religion that could shed the ingrained ideological and theological hostility that tends to ruin relations between Jews, Muslims, and Christians, despite the similarities of their doctrines? Houellebecq does not get us there, but any reader who is skeptical about religion yet aware of the existential problems that atheism and materialism pose should find in Houellebecq's work not only a brilliant depiction of the social and psychological stakes involved in "post-religious modernity," but also motivation, borne out of horror, to be sure, to do something for the spiritual growth of humankind.

Houellebecq's affinities with the pre-Marxist utopianism of the nineteenth century are far-reaching, and if anything, this chapter has demonstrated the degree to which reading Houellebecq from the received Anglo-American critical tradition, which begins with the Marx-Freud-Nietzsche tripartite and winds its way through Foucault, Bourdieu, Lacan, and other theory icons, leads us somewhat astray of the goal. Houellebecq's thought is theological, even if the author's convictions are not, and he must be read from the critical point of view of those whose thinking flows not only toward questions of politics and power, class and gender, and the dynamics of marginality and minority (however important these may be), but also toward matters of life, death, immortality, and meaning, as well as humanity's place and purpose in the universe. Given his sustained engagement with the so-called *ultimate questions*, Houellebecq is an author who could be studied as much in theology programs as in literature departments.¹³⁵ In literature there is some danger—entirely unjustified in my

¹³⁵ "... Theology, however implausible many of its truth claims, is one of the most ambitious theoretical arenas left in an increasingly specialized world—one whose subject is nothing less than the nature and destiny of humanity itself, in relation to what it considers to be its transcendent source of life. These are not questions one can easily raise in analytic philosophy or political science... In a world in which theology

view—that he will be perceived as a very clever but eminently condemnable provocateur, a highly significant case of personal prejudice transformed into literary sensation. This would indeed be a sad development; for the insights into contemporary French society and culture that Houellebecq’s fiction offers are surely a boon to anyone engaged in the work of contemporary French cultural studies.

So long as Houellebecq remains a *purely literary figure*, he may never be adequately appreciated. The author’s declaration in the *Lettre à Lakis Proguidis* that “comme le montrent éloquemment les exemples de Dostoïevksi ou de Thomas Mann, le roman est un lieu naturel pour l’expression de débats ou déchirements philosophiques” (Houellebecq, 2009, p. 152), thus applies to Houellebecq as well. That an author should be otherwise is the bias of an age that, we should hope, is already well behind us.

is increasingly part of the problem... it is also fostering the kind of critical reflection which might contribute to some of the answers” (Eagleton, 2009, pp. 167-168).

CONCLUDING CHAPTER:

“POST-68” FRENCH THOUGHT, HOUELLEBECQ IN 2010, AND THE HOUELLEBECQUIAN WORLDVIEW RE-EXAMINED

Slowly but surely, Michel Houellebecq has made his presence felt on the other side of the Atlantic. In 2009, Yale French Studies published a special issue entitled “Turns to the Right?” which addressed, on the one hand, the extensive affinities between Houellebecq’s work and that of major intellectual and literary figures that have emerged in France since the 1970s, and, on the other hand, the blossoming in the decades since May 1968 of an intellectual and literary movement within the Hexagon that has all the appearances of a “return to the right.” The volume’s editors explain,

In France... we have noticed an increasing phenomenon over the past decade or so that seems to be symptomatic of a malaise in some quarters, one that relates, perhaps, to a perceived loss of French identity and the possible loss of a French exception. Such a sense of national loss has led, in many cases, to what appears initially to be an ideological shift to the right. This apparent shift plays out in the arts, especially in literature... In a France that is more and more integrated into a more generally European model, there has been, in a number of quarters, a dialectical turn of the screw that has produced fascinating aesthetic and philosophical projects... Thus we have seen writers like Richard Millet, Michel Houellebecq, Maurice Dantec, and Marc Édouard-Nabe come to the fore, each of whom espouses a position of return that, while not necessarily exactly the position of the Front National, certainly seems to put in question universal republican values for all (Johnson and Schehr, 2000, p. 1).

Wisely, Johnson and Schehr avoid grouping all literary and intellectual production occurring within this “neo-right” paradigm under the heading of “reactionary.” Unlike Daniel Lindenberg, who, in the highly criticized 2002 pamphlet *Le rappel à l’ordre: enquête sur les nouveaux réactionnaires*, lumped together as “reactionaries” such diverse thinkers as Marcel Gauchet, Alain Finkelkraut, Michel Houellebecq, and Alain Badiou,

the editors explain that the essays in their volume “do not simply diagnose a general *droitisation* of the French cultural landscape, as though one could find a stable vantage point from which to make such a diagnosis. Rather, they indicate a sense of disorientation, or perhaps *reorientation*, in regards to the traditional Left-Right distribution of political sensitivities inherited from the Enlightenment” (Johnson and Schehr, 2009, p. 2). In Houellebecq’s case, this reorientation of the concept of French Left and Right sheds light on the author’s seemingly antagonistic political commitments, which at once favor both “traditional values,” such as family and abstinence, and “progressive values” that identify consumerism and liberal economics as inimical to human flourishing. Johnson and Schehr point to what has been evident to their French counterparts for years: that the conclusion of the revolutionary period that inaugurated French political identity at the end of the eighteenth century has obscured the *raison d’être* of France’s traditional Left-Right distinction, generating at once a great deal of ideological confusion, and a concomitant abundance of aesthetic reaction, the most significant of which may be Michel Houellebecq’s fiction.

Unsurprisingly, nothing, or at least very little, in Johnson and Schehr’s volume (which includes articles by François Noudelman, Verena Conley, and Douglas Morrey) addresses the religious and theological questions that I have raised throughout this book. Yale’s treatment of the “post-revolutionary” aesthetic of much of contemporary French letters and thought appears as committed to *laïcité* as is France; the result is that the question of religion, so central not only to Houellebecq but to authors such as Philippe Sollers and Maurice Dantec, is once again overlooked. Nonetheless, the virtue of the Yale volume is that it points out crucial ideological and aesthetic connections among

France's most prominent "post-revolutionary" authors, in conjunction with the neo-humanist philosophers and intellectuals of the 1970s and 1980s, notably Luc Ferry, Gilles Lipovetsky, Régis Debray, André Glucksmann, Pascal Bruckner, and, of course, Bernard-Henri Lévy. As the volume reveals, and as European intellectuals have recognized for some time, Houellebecq's thought is not an isolated case of cynical fancy and apocalyptic gloom fitted to the literary mold, but rather represents the more aesthetic, and to some degree more humoristic, end of a broader response to the intellectual production of the 1960s and the "Americanization" of France in subsequent decades. The foundation of Houellebecq's critique of European modernity may lie in his reaction to materialism, but that reaction is embedded in the context of a specifically late-twentieth century—and specifically French—treatment of the ills of consumerism, the legacy of May 1968, as well as the effects of globalization, Americanization, and multiculturalism on French identity in the "post-revolutionary" period.

That a flagship literary institution such as Yale should have come to Houellebecq and to France's "reactionary" literary movement so late is initially surprising. However, when we consider the divergent intellectual commitments of France and the United States that have emerged during and in the wake of the "Theory Age" of the 1970s and 1980s, nothing about the American Academy's belated engagement with contemporary French literary production—as well as with its most prominent intellectuals, who still take second place to the likes of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and others—should strike us as particularly out of the ordinary. François Cusset, whose monumental study of Franco-American intellectual history *French Theory* tells the story of the rise of Theory in the United States and its precipitous collapse in France, explains,

À l'avant de cette offensive contre les dictatures autant que contre Mai 1968, contre la révolte et contre la théorie, un groupe de jeunes intellectuels... s'autoproclame 'les nouveaux philosophes' Bernard-Henri Lévy, André Glucksmann, Maurice Clavel et quelques autres enregistrent des succès de librairie spectaculaires avec des essais de circonstances qui dénoncent la pensée révolutionnaire et replacent les droits de l'homme au centre du 'débat'...

...le désarroi est lié à une recomposition en profondeur du champ intellectuel français, dont les positions dominantes sont peu à peu transférées de l'université alternative vers les médias officiels, d'une ultra-gauche sans étiquette aux nouveaux cercles de centre-gauche, et des critiques du capital et de la culture bourgeoise vers les nouvelles imprécations géopolitiques et humanitaires (Cusset, 2003, pp. 325, 327).

Just as Foucault and company were beginning to be read and appropriated among the Anglo-American Intelligentsia, France had already started repudiating its intellectual celebrities overseas. This significant divergence is often ignored in the United States, so much so that brilliant anthologies such as Mark Lilla's *New French Thought* (1994), which remains the authoritative reader in post-Theory French philosophy, goes unnoticed by most American scholars.¹³⁶ Needless to say, without a proper understanding of the evolution from revolutionary "theory" to the mediocratic, neo-Kantian humanism typical of the current milieu, little of recent French literary and intellectual production can be properly understood. The Anglo-American literati may spill as much ink as they want writing about such theory-friendly novelists as Tahar Ben Jelloun and Dany Laferrière; in reality, it is authors Michel Houellebecq and Jonathan Littell who are now winning *Prix Goncourt*.¹³⁷

Apart from its aesthetic uniqueness, Houellebecq's beleaguering treatment of consumerism, sexual liberalism, and the cultural consequences of May 1968 in *Les particules élémentaires* and elsewhere is a restatement of ideas that have been prominent

¹³⁶ See Cusset (2003), p. 289.

¹³⁷ To be fair, Jelloun did win the Prix Goncourt in 1987 for his novel *La nuit sacrée*.

in French cultural discourse for some time. “Ses idées,” writes Olivier Bardolle, “n’ont rien d’extraordinaire, elles sont évoquées tous les jours autour des zincs de bistrot, dans les bureaux, dans les dîners en ville, et par des gens très bien, pas spécialement ‘réactionnaires’” (Bardolle, 2003, pp. 62-63). Houellebecq’s forebears are prominent French intellectuals, and one does not have to dig deeply in their texts to discover the same *discours* condemning the social ramifications of May 1968. Régis Debray, for instance, writes in his relatively obscure pamphlet *Modeste contribution aux discours et cérémonies du dixième anniversaire*, that “les revendications d’identité (le droit à la différence) affleurant en Mai viennent au devant des exigences de fonctionnalité du système d’exploitation. Ce qui est apparu alors comme contraintes pour l’existence individuelle, c’était à terme des contraintes pour l’extension de la marchandise à tout le champ social” (Debray, 1978, p. 14). By evacuating the constraints on individual liberty imposed by the antiquated university system, Gaullist patriarchy, and the Catholic Church, the revolt against repressive institutions in fact only delivered human subjectivity—or better yet, a *de-subjugated* human subjectivity—to the forces of the market. Debray’s insight prefigures Houellebecq’s claim in *Particules* that sexual liberalism destroyed the “last bastions of primitive communism,” (i.e. the family) and reiterates similar statements by Raymond Aron and Robespierre, who criticized their respective revolutions for dismantling entrenched social institutions, however repressive, (in Aron’s case, the university system, in Robespierre’s, the Catholic Church) without offering anything to replace them.

The idea that the events of May 1968 had a pernicious rather than salutary effect on French culture developed during the course of the 1980s, with different writers

following different vectors of critique all united by a common sense of suspicion. Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, for example, argue in *La pensée 68: essai sur l'anti-humanisme contemporain* that the work of philosophers Foucault, Bourdieu, Althusser, and Derrida had in fact contributed to a “disintegration of the subject” that led to an era of narcissism and indifference in the 1980s. They write,

Il n'en demeure pas moins que se trouve grandement dissipé par ces analyses le paradoxe apparent qui tenait à la coexistence, dans les dernières années des 'sixties,' d'une pensée radicalement critique à l'égard de la subjectivité et d'un mouvement social axé sur la promotion de l'individualité: *le sujet meurt dans l'avènement de l'individu*. De ce point de vue, le rôle joué par les diverses figures de la pensée 68 devient compréhensible: de la psychanalyse lacanisée aux dérives nietzschomarixiennes, la pensée 68 légitime philosophiquement l'hétéronomie au nom de laquelle le Moi fluidifié se vide de toute substance. En critiquant comme ‘métaphysique’ ou comme ‘idéologique’ le projet de maîtrise et de vérité sur soi-même qui fait partie intégrante de la notion traditionnelle de la subjectivité, en multipliant les variations sur le thème selon lequel ‘Je est un autre,’ les ‘sixties’ philosophantes ont amorcé et accompagné le procès de désagrégation du Moi qui conduit vers ‘la conscience *cool* et désinvolte’ des années quatre-vingt (Ferry et Renaut, 1985, pp. 101-102).

In place of the “evacuated subject,” who falls prey to capitalism and the noxious determinations of the *hypermarché social* (Houellebecq, 2009, pp. 27-28), Ferry and Renaut urge a return to a universalistic and Kantian conception of morality capable of re-centering French identity on renewed humanitarian commitments. Houellebecq’s implicit condemnation of suicide in *La carte et le territoire*, which cites the Kantian injunction not to “destroy the subject of morality” in oneself (Houellebecq, 2010a, p. 287), is reminiscent of Ferry and Renaut’s position, as is the narrator clone’s discussion of the fate of “French philosophy” at the end of *Les particules élémentaires*:

Le ridicule global dans lequel avaient subitement sombré, après des décennies de surestimation insensée, les travaux de Foucault, de Lacan, de Derrida et de Deleuze ne devait sur le moment laisser le champ libre à aucune pensée philosophique neuve, mais au contraire jeter le discrédit sur

l'ensemble des intellectuels se réclamant des 'sciences humaines'
(Houellebecq, 1998a, p. 391).

Taken slightly out of context, the post-human scenario explored at the end of *Particules* represents more seriously an alternative to the narcissistic culture of the French (and American) 1980s. If the work of *soixante-huitard* philosophers has only delivered a de-centered Western subject to the vicissitudes of Capital, better to do away with philosophy altogether, or at least with the more relativistic and anti-scientific strands of much of twentieth-century philosophy, and reformulate society on scientific and implicitly positivist principles (as Houellebecq's comments on Comte discussed earlier make clear).

The other great French critic of 1968 is Gilles Lipovetsky, whose 1983 book *L'ère du vide* stands out as the most sustained exploration of the consequences of the May revolution ever written. Sabine van Wesemael, the first Houellebecq scholar to have pointed out (to my knowledge) the affinities between Houellebecq and Lipovetsky, writes:

Michel Houellebecq, dans ses romans, illustre... parfaitement les théories soutenues par Lipovetsky concernant l'avènement de l'individualisme moderne: narcissique, apathique, égoïste et indifférent. L'individualisme narcissique est une réaction aux déceptions et aux frustrations engendrées par les grandes mobilisations idéologiques et utopiques. Houellebecq, lui aussi, signale sans cesse le déclin idéologique des systèmes occidentaux (van Wesemael, 2005a, p. 86).

Like Debray, Lipovetsky sees in May 1968 the rise of the consumerist individual from the ashes of the "subject". He writes,

Qui est encore épargné par ce raz de marée ? Ici comme ailleurs le désert croit: le savoir, le pouvoir, le travail, l'armée, la famille, l'Église, etc. ont déjà cessé de fonctionner comme des principes absolus et intangibles, à des degrés différents personne n'y croit, plus personne n'y investit quoi que ce soit... Partout l'onde de désaffection se propage, débarrassant les institutions de leur grandeur antérieure et simultanément de leur puissance de mobilisation émotionnelle (Lipovetsky, 1983, pp. 50-51).

For Lipovetsky, the events of May are not so much the cause but the symptom of a greater “processus de personnalisation” that the democratic and individualistic ethos of the West has been preparing throughout the twentieth century. As much a result of Americanization as it is a simple next step in the evolution of democracy, the “errance apathique” of post-revolutionary modernity (or postmodernity, should the term seem more apposite in this context) “est à mettre au compte de l’*atomisation* programmée qui régit le fonctionnement de nos sociétés” (Lipovetsky, 1983, p. 60).¹³⁸ As the “Me” increasingly becomes the focus of attention, it is uncertainty and doubt, not freedom and self-determination, that grow (Lipovetsky, 1983, p. 79); thus, with the critique of the subject, the state, the Church, and the family, comes not liberty from oppressive bourgeois institutions, but rather the atomization and social confusion we find in Houellebecq’s novels. “Compte tenu du système socio-économique mis en place,” writes Houellebecq in an early interview, “compte tenu surtout de nos présupposés philosophiques, il est visible que l’humain se précipite vers une catastrophe à brève échéance, et dans des conditions atroces; nous y sommes déjà. La conséquence logique de l’individualisme c’est le meurtre, et le malheur” (Houellebecq, 2009, p. 63).

Beyond the issue of 1968, though still within the context of a post-68 literary “reaction,” Houellebecq also finds affinities with his contemporary Maurice G. Dantec, a self-proclaimed “Catholic of the future” (Pollin, 2009, p. 156) who exiled himself to Quebec in 1998, and who is perhaps best known for his “metaphysical and polemical diary,” *Le théâtre des opérations*, a sprawling three-volume work that treats every

¹³⁸ Houellebecq does not lay everything at the doorstep of 1968. In a 1999 interview, he says, “De toute façon, il ne faut pas trop se focaliser sur Mai 68: il m’a toujours semblé qu’on exagérait les différences entre les années 60, 70, 80, 90... Disons que c’est un thème pour journalistes ‘de société’ bien plus qu’une réalité : le phénomène marquant du demi-siècle, c’est quand même la domination culturelle américaine” (Houellebecq, 1999, p. 202).

imaginable issue, from artificial intelligence and genetic engineering to Christianity, Marxism, and the Balkan conflicts. Dantec's work is at once complex and in some respects obscured by the author's peculiar use of language; suffice it to say that Dantec's philosophical predicates are primarily nietzschean, and that his goal, reminiscent of Houellebecq's seemingly contradictory commitment to both progressive and traditional values, is to contaminate "the stable consensual ground shared ideologically by both the Right and the Left since the eighteenth century" (i.e. the dialectic of revolutionary progressivism and counter-revolutionary conservatism) (Pollin, 2009, p. 163). Dantec writes,

On ne peut comprendre l'évolution particulière de l'humanité, son caractère fractale, cet éternel retour des choses qui paradoxalement produit le changement, sans se défaire une fois pour toutes des théories sociologiques, modernes, marxistes ou non, qui toutes tentent désespérément de trouver des *lois historiques dans le mouvement des masses sociales* (Dantec, 2000, p. 38).

The accepted conceptual apparatus for organizing the West's political ethos finds itself called drastically into question in Dantec's work, wherein the author confronts the historicizing and dialectical tendencies of "sociological and Marxist theories" with a kind of Christian, implicitly Gnostic, and world-deprecating worldview that identifies the West, and specifically France, as a collapsed or imminently collapsing civilization no longer able to exercise influence over the rest of the world:

La France ne tient plus que par l'État. C'est-à-dire par rien: une fiction à laquelle personne ne croit, y compris ses serviteurs... La France n'a longtemps survécu que grâce à la force d'inertie d'un mirage politique, définitivement évanoui, et qui ne peut plus rien pour empêcher la longue chute de la nation dans le gouffre (Dantec, 2000, p. 160).

This perspective finds expression in Dantec's fiction, perhaps most notably in *Villa Vortex*, a kind of spiritual crime thriller in which a morose, obsessive, and violent

detective Kernal and his sadistic partner Mazarin futilely pursue the “enemies of the Republic” in France’s waning years as a coherent political entity.

Mazarin et moi avons compris ce jour-là que nos ennemis n’étaient pas seulement les services rivaux, comme la Gendarmerie, voire certains collègues de la Préfecture, non, désormais, nous l’avions compris, il s’agissait de pans entiers de l’État.

En fait, et je crois que pour nous l’entrée dans l’an 2000 correspondait pile à cette remise à zéro des compteurs, il n’y avait plus d’État.

Il existait un mythe sympathique qui recouvrait une réalité faite de féodalités aux incestueux accouplements et à l’engeance nauséabonde.

Nous œuvrions pour une fiction (Dantec, 2003, p. 548).

Dantec’s discourse of “déclinisme” not only addresses the supposed decline of French cultural influence in a globalized and Americanized world culture, but, more alarmingly, foresees the disintegration of France as a nation-state, as communitarian forces wage ideological and actual war against each other under the illusory auspices of a unified Republican identity.

Houellebecq’s thematic relationship to Dantec, a writer whose thought is so aestheticized that it can border on the unintelligible, is often elliptical,¹³⁹ but it is possible to point to a number of similarities that lend the work of both writers a palpable sense of common concern. On the one hand, both Houellebecq and Dantec identify science as a dissolving, atomizing force that informs much of the pathos of Western modernity, and that contributes to the political atomization that Dantec believes has fractured French political identity. Dantec writes,

La prolifération des connaissances scientifiques dans le délicat réseau capillaire de nos sociétés agit comme un puissant dissolvant, irriguant toutes les cellules individuelles, les atomisant devant l’insoutenable vérité. Aucune croyance un tant soi peu n’y résiste. D’où, comme à l’époque de

¹³⁹ Dantec writes of Houellebecq, “bien sûr, je suis en total désaccord avec ses prédicats philosophiques, et, par conséquent, avec ses conclusions. Mais voilà enfin quelqu’un avec qui il va être foutrement intéressant d’être en désaccord” (Dantec, 2000, p. 42).

Socrate, ou de la naissance du christianisme, une prolifération de croyances individuelles, ou sectaires, chacune cherchant à reconstruire l'idéal ancien de l'unité originelle de l'Homme et de la Nature. Jusqu'au meurtre. Jusqu'au suicide de masse. Jusqu'à l'anéantissement de la civilisation (Dantec, 2000, p. 24).

On the other hand, the two authors entertain visions of France's future that border on the apocalyptic. In echo to Dantec's comments above, Houellebecq writes in *Ennemis publics*:

S'imaginer-t-on vraiment que nous [les Français] vont devenir des leaders dans l'industrie du logiciel ou des micro-processeurs? Que nous allons maintenir une *industrie puissante et exportatrice*? Que Paris va se transformer en un *pôle d'excellence financière*? Allons allons...

Est-ce que ça veut dire que *j'accepte sans broncher* cette nouvelle division internationale du travail? Ben oui, et je ne vois d'ailleurs pas comment je pourrais faire autrement. Les « nouveaux pays émergents » veulent gagner de l'argent, grand bien leur fasse; nous avons les moyens de le leur faire dépenser. Disons les choses plus crûment : est-ce que j'ai envie de voir la France transformée en un pays muséifié, mort? en une sorte de *bordel à touristes*? de faire un peu à la France ce que Bertrand Delanoë, ce génial précurseur, est en train de faire à Paris? Sans hésiter, je réponds: OUI (Houellebecq, 2008, p. 125).

Admittedly, Houellebecq's vision of a de-industrialized France, such as we encounter it in *La carte et le territoire*, is a superior alternative to the collapse of the French Republic into an eternally-warring set of political and religious factions. Dantec is a humorless writer, and for this reason his work often becomes unreadable through sheer intensity; with Houellebecq we at least have the chance to laugh. More importantly, Dantec is a man of spiritual and specifically Catholic convictions, whose "Gnosticized" Christian eschatology "presents Christ as a 'metahuman' and cataclysmic principle that does not compromise with any worldly authorities, but conversely calls for their actual abolition" (Pollin, 2009, p. 167). Houellebecq, meanwhile, for all his worry over the fate of humanity in the absence of religion, offers a vision of the future in which human beings

and human civilization are reduced to ashes not by divine wrath but by the simple forward movement of time. Dantec is a theologized Houellebecq, and Houellebecq a de-theologized Dantec. Both “glimpse the end in everything,”¹⁴⁰ but the resolutions they envision are markedly different.

Finally, Houellebecq shares much in common with the late Philippe Muray, a French novelist, polemicist, and historian of the nineteenth century famous and indeed infamous for his iconoclasm and objections (à la Guy Debord) to what he termed the culture of *homo festivus*; and, perhaps more surprisingly, to Georges Bataille, a writer who, though often placed within the canon of High Theory, was perhaps France’s last philosopher and literary figure to have engaged seriously the question of religion. Specifically, all three writers address, in their particular manner, the dynamics and dialects of the *party*. While Houellebecq’s comments are more humorous than they are critical, they touch on questions of religion and nihilism that provided objects of serious and sustained inquiry for Bataille and Muray. Houellebecq’s *La fête* offers the following observations:

Le but de la fête est de nous faire oublier que nous sommes solitaires, misérables et promis à la mort; autrement dit, de nous transformer en animaux. C'est pourquoi le primitif a un sens de la fête très développé. Une bonne flambée de plantes hallucinogènes, trois tambourins et le tour est joué: un rien l'amuse. A l'opposé, l'occidental moyen n'aboutit à une extase insuffisante qu'à l'issue de *raves* interminables dont il ressort sourd et drogué: *il n'a pas le sens de la fête*. Profondément conscient de lui-même, radicalement étranger aux autres, terrorisé par l'idée de la mort, il est bien incapable d'accéder à une quelconque exaltation. Cependant, il s'obstine. La perte de la condition animale l'attriste, il en conçoit honte et dépit; il aimerait être un fêtard, ou du moins passer pour tel. Il est dans une sale situation (Houellebecq, 1998d, p. 71).

¹⁴⁰ See footnote 6.

As is common in much of Houellebecq's work, this passage achieves its humorous effect through a kind of sociologically rendered *pathétique*. In Bataille, we find the same discourse on animality and transcendence built into a philosophically serious discussion, concerned with the limits of human experience and humanity's attempts to exceed them.

Writes Bataille in *Théorie de la religion*,

Le problème incessant posé par l'impossibilité d'être humain sans être une chose et d'échapper aux limites des choses sans revenir au sommeil animal reçoit la solution de la fête (Bataille, 1973, p. 73).

And :

La fête a lieu pour... rendre [l'homme] à l'immanence, mais la condition de retour est l'obscurité de la conscience. Ce n'est donc pas l'humanité—en tant que la conscience claire justement l'oppose à l'animalité—qui est rendue à l'immanence. La vertu de la fête n'est pas intégrée dans sa nature et réciproquement le déchaînement de la fête n'a été possible qu'en raison de cette impuissance de la conscience à le prendre pour ce qu'il est (Bataille, 1973, pp. 76-77).

Houellebecq's comments on partying may not boast the dialectical verve of Bataille's prose, but the authors' views coincide on one crucial point: that the purpose of the party is to return the partygoer to a condition of animality, in which perceptual immanence—a state of awareness limited strictly to the present moment, as is typical, in Bataille's view, of animal consciousness—replaces transcendent awareness, that ignominious mark of human perception that has saddled us with our awareness of time, decay, and death. The party serves to extirpate us from the gloom of transcendent consciousness—to restate: “Le but de la fête est de *nous faire oublier que nous sommes solitaires, misérables, et promis à la mort.*”¹⁴¹ But, just as Bataille points out in his analysis, because the party must presuppose the very thing it attempts to negate, it is necessarily—or “always

¹⁴¹ My emphasis

already,” to employ a post-structuralist turn of phrase—a failure (Houellebecq, 1998d, p. 73).

According to Bataille, relief from the anguish of transcendence, by means of an entry into immanent consciousness, presupposes the presence of transcendent awareness as the object on which immanence operates. Within immanence, anguish evaporates, but so does the consciousness of a *need* to escape. One cannot be delivered from anguish *within* consciousness; one must forego consciousness altogether. Bataille’s evaluation is highly dialectical: we witness a kind of demonstration of the impossibility of a wished for synthesis, an emerging aporia that bars the reconciliation of what are, in any case, irreconcilable terms. Houellebecq’s point is perhaps easier to grasp: the Westerner is excessively aware of himself, too much so really to be able to forget the cold hard facts of material existence: “Profondément conscient de lui-même, radicalement étranger aux autres, terrorisé par l’idée de la mort, il est bien incapable d’accéder à une quelconque exaltation.” Thus the party is *necessarily* a failure. Desires for a return to immanence are evoked (through sex, music, drugs, etc.) while the atmosphere of narcissism supposedly typical of the materialistic, capitalist West makes impossible the degree of intersubjectivity requisite for the successful party. When alcohol is added to the mix, thus increasing these desires, things become worse, sometimes even violent (Houellebecq, 1998d, p. 73). Hence the importance of visualizing the past failures of other parties in order to dissuade oneself from attending the next one; either that or leaving early: after all, “Une bonne fête est une fête brève” (Houellebecq, 1998d, p. 73).

While Bataille attempted to prod the phenomenological depths of human experience by recourse to the sordid and the profane, Philippe Muray, writing at the end

of the twentieth century, identifies the striving for obliterated, animal consciousness as the dominant ethos of “fin de siècle” French culture. In his polemical journal *Après l'histoire*, published in 1999, Muray fumes against the dissipation of *homo festivus*:

Ne pas avoir besoin de mots, de nos jours, est une qualité. Il y a peu de temps encore, avant le triomphe du festivisme, on aurait peut-être vu, dans cet abandon de la parole vivante, une inquiétante esquisse du retour à l'animalité. Mais ce retour n'est déjà plus repérable : il est en cours d'accomplissement (Muray, 1999b, p. 18).

L'idéologie d'aujourd'hui consiste... à faire croire à l'Histoire au sein d'une société qui en est concrètement sortie et qui vit de nouvelles aventures encore mal définissables. L'idéologie hyperfestive se livre à un perpétuel travail de dissimulation. Elle cherche à rendre illisible sa propre anhistoricité (1999b, p. 41).

Il n'est déjà plus possible de raisonner autrement qu'en termes festifs (1999b, p. 39).

L'universel redevenir-animal actuel de toute notre civilisation [est] inséparable de la chute de l'ère chrétienne, de la disparition de l'Histoire et de la progressive mise en place du matriarcat (1999b, p. 59).

In Muray's dour, somewhat reactionary perspective, the party ethos is the staple and defining mark of contemporary Western culture: having arrived at a point in History in which struggle has ended, the only true occupation remaining for human beings is a bestial pursuit of pleasure—the party. All social realities are arranged so as to make suffering as impossible as possible. When the contingencies of the natural world strike back against *homo festivus*, he is stupefied, unable to believe that the world might be indifferent, sometimes even hostile, to the seamless unfolding of the *grande fête*.¹⁴²

¹⁴² “Ce qui est singulier, c'est l'air de stupéfaction infinie, c'est l'expression de douloureuse surprise d'Homo festivus chaque fois que la Nature lui joue un de ses tours. La montagne serait méchante? L'océan dangereux? Les rivières peuvent grossir jusqu'à devenir des fleuves mortels? Même la recherche systématique des responsabilités, les mises en examen, la traque des coupables, ne consoleront jamais Homo festivus de ce genre de trahison” (Muray, 1999, pp. 32-33).

Houellebecq's comments, however, would indicate that homo festivus' attempts at bestial immanence are not as successful as Muray wants to imagine. On Houellebecq's account, the terror of extinction is too prominent: contrary to what La Rochefoucauld claims in one of his famous maxims, Houellebecq *does* seem to be able to gaze into the terror of death as if into the sun itself.¹⁴³ Has humanity so re-animalized itself that it has forgotten its own mortality, or is it rather a case, more à la Bataille, of a desperate attempt at the annihilation of transcendent awareness *amidst* the consciousness of mortality? If the latter, it is perhaps this dialectical struggle, which Bataille describes so well, that we, to take Muray at his word, are now engaged with as a civilization, but in which we are necessarily doomed to fail. As Houellebecq sees so plainly, man cannot become animal again; whatever solutions to mortal awareness may be proposed must operate within the realm of transcendence. That the world has been "festivized" to the point Muray believes it has ought therefore to strike us as somewhat doubtful, at least within the terms of the discussion: what is really taking place is a violent struggle between the awareness of extinction and the desire for immortality. But given that the party is *necessarily a failure*, how is civilization to be saved? Houellebecq can only offer up a science fiction account in which humanity has been replaced by clones, or a re-ruralized France where *vin de table* sells at 20 euros a bottle. Muray, lacking Houellebecq's utopian sensibilities, is even less helpful.

Even so, what the two authors touch upon in their treatment of transcendence (party-induced or otherwise) and its uneasy relationship with immanence provides a striking paradigm within which to view the "narcissistic turn" that, in the view of an author such as Lipovetsky, has taken place in the West and specifically in France during

¹⁴³ See maxim 26.

our recent *fin de siècle*. Transcendent awareness is a looking-forward beyond the present moment; the desirability of that awareness will therefore be determined by what fills it. When transcendent awareness confronts extinction but lacks the conceptual tools necessary to repudiate it, the desire for a return to animal immanence, to a complete unawareness of death, is both natural and inevitable. However, when transcendent awareness manages to fix as its object immortality, one can be transcendently in the world without anguish. To follow this logic, the culture of the party is a culture whose transcendent gaze sees only a future of decay and annihilation; the longer this mentality persists, the more and more that culture's rituals, its institutions, and its norms will be converted into so many performances of the act of denial of death. Eventually, the culture will be unable to function, simply because it has refused to accept contingency in all its forms; in other words, it has *refused absolutely to suffer*. If Bataille and Muray are able, philosophically and sociologically, to give an account of this process, Houellebecq provides the aesthetic and emotive details that round it out. In the meantime, homo festivus continues his reign.

What we find in the work of authors such as Lipovetsky, Debray, and Ferry and Renaut, along with that of Muray and perhaps to a very small though non-negligible extent in Bataille, and what has ended up being propounded in aesthetic form in Houellebecq's novels (and also in Dantec's work), is a generalized preoccupation with the dangers of dismantling social institutions—be they religions, university systems, or the idea of History—without considering the pernicious forces that might replace them. A classic element of counter-revolutionary critique, this timeless caveat of the right finds expression in a cultural environment—late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century

France—in which, to extrapolate somewhat from Houellebecq’s view, the very ideologues of the left who clamor for revolt against Capital today are the ones who, by permitting the disintegration of the “subject” under the auspices of a liberating “pensée 68,” have in fact created the situation they abhor. Houellebecq’s work attempts to call the bluff, so to speak, of a perceived politically correct French left-wing mentality that refuses to disassociate freedom, justice, and progress from the previous generation’s rejection of traditional social institutions. Yale is thus perhaps too hesitant in its ascriptions of conservatism to Houellebecq and other recent trends in French literary production, so long as we conceive of conservatism in the sense of hostility to overturning social institutions. As Houellebecq shows, in France it now seems possible to be anti-liberal *and* anti-revolutionary at the same time. In other words, the traditional link between abhorrence of Capital and love of upheaval has been called into question. Like a cluster of ominous stars, Michel Houellebecq and his contemporaries glimmer on the horizon of political and ideological developments that have yet to be played out to their logical conclusion.¹⁴⁴

Houellebecq’s fiction is a particular constituent of a broad and complex movement in contemporary French literature and thought that challenges the “legitimacy of the liberal age” (Lilla, 1994) in France, while at the same time, and seemingly paradoxically, condemning the revolutionary impulses that extended the domain of the market to individual existence. Needless to say, this hostility to the ideological forces enabled and unleashed by May 1968 conflicts with the theoretical commitments of much of the Anglo-American Academy, which remains attached, in varying degrees, to the

¹⁴⁴ For more discussion of contemporary French writers working in Houellebecq’s vein, see François Ricard, “Le roman contre le monde (Houellebecq, Muray, Duteurtre),” *Liberté* 41(3), 1999, 48-56.

philosophies of “liberty, autonomy, and emancipation” (Noudelman, 2009, p. 18) that are associated with France’s *pensée 68*. Houellebecq and his contemporaries are thus a *tough nut to crack*, so to speak, for an Anglo-American literati who, by and large, do not yet possess the theoretical and conceptual tools necessary to understand these authors’ beef with the supposedly progressive, and implicitly American and multicultural, turn that segments of French society have taken in the last forty years. Understanding the “reactionary” and post-revolutionary shift in certain areas of contemporary French literary production requires us to set aside, or at the very least employ with an appropriate sense of measure, the post-structuralist, post-modern, and otherwise revolutionary theoretical tools that the Anglo-American Intelligentsia appropriated from the intellectual ferment of the French 1960s. Equally, the political, philosophical, and ideological overtones of the work of authors such as Houellebecq and Dantec oblige scholars to question theories that neglect the agency of the author, and revisit a more Sartrean or Camusian vision of the writer as an engaged aesthete who plays as important a role in social commentary as any academic or public intellectual. Yale’s volume moves us in this direction, but the nostalgia for “High Theory” that certain of the essays betrays¹⁴⁵ makes us wonder if the current breach separating post-revolutionary French thought and Anglo-American multicultural ideology will be crossed any time soon.

History According to Michel H.

¹⁴⁵ In the volume’s lead essay, François Noudelman writes, “Try as it may, the conservative restoration that began in the 1980s cannot encase the present within some patrimonial reification; nor will it stifle those cacophonous voices that today hail difference and becoming. Neither modern nor anti-modern, these voices refurbish the legacy of the sixties, even as they repudiate its utopian excesses” (Noudelman, 2009, p. 17). Such nostalgia for the good old days! I rather doubt that an author such as Houellebecq is trying to “stifle” the “cacophonous voices” of novelists like Tahar ben Jelloun, Dany LaFerrière, or Maryse Condé. It seems that French Theory has had an effect on at least one French academic, even if he is a visiting professor at Johns Hopkins.

This dissertation has addressed the religious, philosophical, and theological considerations that go into giving a proper reading of Houellebecq's work, as well as placed that work within a prominent French literary and ideological context. If I have insisted on anything throughout, it is that Houellebecq, for all his ability to provoke and arouse reflection in his reader, at times so bungles (or at the very least distorts) his representation of the prevailing ethos of contemporary Western modernity that the realist tenor of his fiction can often come off as disingenuous, if not simply ill-informed. Realism may not be so much a commitment to describing reality as it is a kind of *style*, and Houellebecq is able to employ it with considerable bravado. The author's books thus play tricks on the mind: while many of their insights are spot on, and while Houellebecq's tone is perennially matter-of-fact, the overall experience leaves the reader with a dubious impression, if not a sense of scandal. Has the decline of Christianity as a socially structuring institution wreaked its fair share of havoc on the Western psyche? Doubtlessly. But this is hardly reason to think that Christianity will be replaced by a cloning cult, or that contemporary Westerners will accept a materialistic version of immortality. Similarly, is it sensible to conclude, as Houellebecq does in *La carte et le territoire* and *Ennemis publics*, that France will outsource its industrial production and base its economy on tourism? France is one of the largest producers of luxury goods, transportation vehicles, expensive food products, liquors and wines of all sorts—not to mention armaments—in the world, and little reason exists to think this should change, so long as demand for these products does not evaporate and France maintains its military interests in places such as Africa. Houellebecq's speculations about the future of the West are prophecy, and they deserve to be judged as such. Above all, they exist to be

enjoyed. It is undeniably *fun* to entertain far-fetched and fantastic visions of the future, and Houellebecq's sometimes bleak, sometimes inane scenarios are enough to keep conversation at a dinner party going for hours.

For those who are not de facto turned off by the negative press that Houellebecq commonly receives, the author's vision is genuinely seductive, and my comments in this dissertation have revealed my desire to take the author at his word, for better or for worse. Perhaps this has been a mistake in certain respects; indeed, perhaps Houellebecq would find it amusing that someone should have bothered so much over assessing the *real* realism of his work.¹⁴⁶ Whatever the case may be, the moment has now come to move beyond these concerns with realism and tackle the question of what gives rise to Houellebecq's peculiar understanding of modernity (as well as related sense of postmodernity). Houellebecq may ultimately only aim to play, but he certainly plays to *win*, and the carnage that ensues along the way is significant. So let us attempt to walk a very thin intellectual line: reject the seeming realism of the author's texts, but nevertheless refuse to take the Houellebecquian world as the product of mere imagination. In other words, let us try to negotiate the concomitant yet conflicting currents of reality and hyperbole that characterize Houellebecq's work.

Houellebecq's verdict on modernity relies at every turn on a broad historical narrative, borrowed in great degree from Auguste Comte, that pits the rise of the scientific worldview against the traditional Christian civilization of medieval Europe. In this view, modern science brings with it materialism and a mechanistic understanding of the world: where initially the concept of mechanism, as it was elaborated by Newton and

¹⁴⁶ In a 2010 interview with *The Paris Review*, Houellebecq says, "There is a need for intensity. From time to time, you have to forsake harmony. You even have to forsake truth. You have to, when you need to, energetically embrace excessive things."

Galileo, applied only to the physical universe, over the course of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries it gradually insinuated itself into the human universe as well. The notion of a human being living at the whim of its internal mechanisms and desires finds expression in the sentimental literature of the eighteenth century, notably in the work of Choderlos de Laclos and Rousseau (though in significantly different ways), and in the nineteenth century this mechanistic conception of the human is extended to include economics and psychology. In Freudianism, man exists at the mercy of his subconscious; in Marxism, human consciousness is a product of material conditions. In either case, human agency is more or less emasculated. The crowning achievement of materialism comes finally in the twentieth century, when the neurosciences begin to explain human behavior as the product of chemical reactions in the brain. These theoretical developments have had tremendous instrumental power; they have, generally speaking, allowed us to control nature in ways unimaginable in previous periods of human history. But they have also had their downside, and Houellebecq's work exists to bear witness to their limitations, which are numerous.

However—the antagonism between scientific modernity and spirituality (or what figures such as Aldous Huxley and Bede Griffiths called the “Perennial Philosophy”)¹⁴⁷ is *not* enough to explain the Houellebecquian worldview, no more than it can explain in adequate detail the existential dilemmas that supposedly face the contemporary West. On

¹⁴⁷ Bede Griffiths, a British-born Benedictine monk who spent the last twenty-five years of his life in India, writes in *A New Vision of Reality*, “Western Europe rejected the perennial philosophy at the Renaissance and has been led step by step to the materialistic philosophy which rejects fundamental human values and exposes humankind to the contrary forces at work in the universe. The only way of recovery is to rediscover the perennial philosophy, the traditional wisdom, which is found in all ancient religions and especially in the great religions of the world. But those religions have in turn become fossilized and have each to be renewed, not only in themselves but also in relation to one another, so that a cosmic, universal religion can emerge...” (Griffiths, 1989, p. 296). Houellebecq and Griffiths would doubtlessly have found much to agree upon, though of course the former shares none of the latter's spiritual optimism.

the one hand, general historical narratives such as the one offered above, though striking and useful in certain respects, have a terrible habit of *not actually telling you what happened*, and for that reason must be viewed with appropriate suspicion. More importantly, though, even if we do assume that the confrontation between faith and reason has been formative of the Western psyche, that conflict is unable to explain the strange situation of religion in Europe, where belief is common but religious expression virtually absent in certain countries. This last consideration in fact brings us to the heart of the matter: how does Houellebecq manage to produce such a striking and disturbing depiction of Western spiritual malaise when the very narrative that that depiction relies on—that of the triumph of reason over faith and modern atomization over medieval synthesis—appears to lack empirical validity in view of statistical measures of European religiosity? We can of course say that Houellebecq just gets it wrong; but if that were the case, no one would bother to read him, at least not seriously. But we cannot say he is right, either: Europeans do remain “pious,” in their own way, as any honest sociologist must admit. So what exactly is going on?

The problem has to do not so much with the historical narrative Houellebecq adopts as with a potential over-valuing of spirituality’s power to lift the human being out of the despair and unhappiness supposedly incurred by modernization and a concomitant drift toward materialism. Materialism has never been the vogue, except among (say) ideologues of the Leninist, Stalinist, or Maoist ilk; it has captivated and preoccupied scientists and intellectuals—often French—but the idea that the human being is no more than a body and that human personality is extinguished by death has never, or only rarely, rallied majority opinion, even in societies where it was the official doctrine. The evidence

of religion's persistence in a "secular age" is perhaps the clearest indicator that such a viewpoint has typically been not the product of a populist ethos, but rather simply of intellectual elitism. Materialism's effect on humanity is really not spiritual at all, at least not directly. It is, rather, ecological and, above all, economic.

In order to understand this point, we have only to examine the antagonism between spirituality and consumerism. Consumerism, for which Houellebecq blames the United States (and no doubt he is right to a great extent, though much can be said in this respect about China, Great Britain, and France, even if the goods being peddled vary from country to country), tells us that happiness is to be found in material possessions. Christianity, which attempts to limit the appeal of the flesh, tells us the very opposite—that real happiness is to be found in the denial of worldly pleasures and by living according to the will of God.¹⁴⁸ Consumerism elaborates an economic worldview based on the assumptions of thoroughgoing scientific materialism (or physicalism), and the result, in the Houellebecquian universe, is a society in which the ultimate value located at the heart of the public sphere—material possessions, youth, beauty, etc.—is exactly the contrary of that which we find in the human heart, which seeks meaning, transcendence, and love. It seems trivial to point out that no degree of spiritual conviction is likely to overcome the prevalence of such a noxious system of values. Houellebecq's critique of materialism is a critique of materialism *via consumerism*. Human beings have never, properly speaking, held to a materialistic worldview, but they have allowed themselves to be intoxicated (at least in the West) by the desire to *have*. This situation prevails as much

¹⁴⁸ Elohimism only confirms the degree to which Christianity has fallen out of favor with Western culture in *La possibilité d'une île*. While Christianity denies the flesh, Elohimism exalts it. The two religions are foils to each other.

in France as it does in the United States, and no amount of piety can overcome the destruction that it causes to the human soul.

This is not to say that Houellebecq is blaming capitalism—at least not directly. Liberalism’s traditional enemy, Marxism, is already implicated in the triumph of consumerism: it, too, is beholden to a mechanistic conception of human activity, and for that reason it does little to move humanity away from materialism. Expanding somewhat on Houellebecq’s views, where Marxism and liberalism err is in assuming that happiness can somehow grow out of ideal economic conditions. For the communist, such conditions involved the collectivization of labor and a growing awareness of class struggle; for the capitalist, they describe a society in which free competition should guarantee the prosperity of all. The two systems are radically different within the perspective of Western thought; their confrontation has caused all the misery in the world, and if liberalism has won out, this is probably only because it is more accommodating of human selfishness. From an outsider’s perspective, however, the differences are not so clear: both systems predicate human happiness on economic organization, both are consequences of scientific materialism, and, more importantly, both have produced an incredible amount of destruction, both psychological and material.

The Houellebecquian worldview emerges from a critique of materialism that subsumes economics under a broader, physicalist understanding of reality, and that treats consumerism as the logical consequence of the application of that understanding to human economic organization. There is no great mystery to be solved here: so long as we suppose that human nature seeks more than physical gratification and material wellbeing, no system of economic arrangement that does not harmonize with spirituality

will be particularly promising as far as human happiness is concerned. That it could be otherwise is perhaps one of the greatest errors that the West has ever managed to commit, and Houellebecq's fiction is a uniquely devastating condemnation of our civilization's shortsightedness.

La carte et le territoire and Beyond

When I began writing this dissertation in early 2010, I had no idea that Houellebecq was busy preparing *La carte et le territoire* for publication later that year. Houellebecq's most recent novel tells the story of Jed Martin, a photographer and painter who makes a fortune selling his series of "trade portraits," which depict bartenders, architects, CEOs, and artists hard at work in the waning years of industrial Western civilization. During the course of the narrative, Martin meets a fictional Michel Houellebecq, whom Martin convinces to write a review piece accompanying the opening of the latter's exhibition. The two artists, as much loners as they are misanthropes, strike up the beginnings of a friendship, but halfway through the novel a human corpse-collecting psychopath murders Houellebecq and paints the author's living room with his victim's entrails. Martin, meanwhile, who has had a failed go at love with a beautiful Russian name Olga, retires permanently to the countryside, where he spends the last twenty years of his life filming plants and trees. In his last artistic effort, Martin superimposes images of deteriorating human figurines and cityscapes onto an eternal backdrop of flora—no doubt as a commentary on the fleeting nature of human life. The novel closes with the ominous (and darkly funny) conclusion: "Le triomphe de la végétation est totale" (Houellebecq, 2010a, p. 428).

La carte et le territoire is a stranger novel in many respects than its forebears; it is more modest in tone and in polemic (for example, we find very few *scènes de cul* and nothing at all about Islam in it), and the work abandons the religious and utopian discourse of previous efforts, settling instead for a kind of lonely resignation to the moral decadence of liberalism. As I indicated in chapter five, Houellebecq's latest work is a testimony to the author's disappointing engagement with utopianism and new age religion; where in previous novels Houellebecq entertained the possibility of salvation before giving in to pessimism, in *La carte et le territoire* the fictional Houellebecq prefers to withdraw from the world and end his life alone in the countryside of the *Loiret*.

As he explains to Jed:

Eh bien, vous avez raison: ma vie s'achève, et je suis déçu, Rien de ce que j'espérais dans ma jeunesse ne s'est produit. Il y a eu des moments intéressants, mais toujours difficiles, toujours arrachés à la limite de mes forces, rien jamais ne m'est apparu comme un don et maintenant j'en ai juste assez, je voudrais juste que tout se termine sans souffrances excessives, sans maladie invalidante, sans infirmité (Houellebecq, 2010a, p. 261).

Having achieved his own share of fame as an artist, Jed's ambitions are no different from Houellebecq's. As he returns from his visit to Houellebecq's country home, Jed remarks,

On était le dimanche 1^{er} janvier, se dit Jed, ce n'était pas seulement la fin d'un week-end mais aussi celle d'une période de vacances, et le début d'une nouvelle année pour tous ces gens qui rentraient, lentement, en pestant probablement sur la lenteur du trafic... et qui après une courte nuit reprendraient leur place... dans le système de production occidental... [Jed] avait été distingué, moins d'un mois auparavant, par la *loi de l'offre et de la demande*, la richesse l'avait soudain enveloppé comme une pluie d'étincelles, délivré du joug financier, et il se rendit compte qu'il allait maintenant quitter ce monde dont il n'avait jamais véritablement fait partie, ses rapports humains déjà peu nombreux allaient un par un s'assécher et se tarir, il serait dans la vie comme il l'était à présent dans l'habitable à la finition parfaite de son Audi Allroad A6, paisible et sans joie, définitivement neutre (Houellebecq, 2010a, p. 269).

Like earlier novels, there is no redemption for the main characters of *La carte et le territoire*—but neither is there talk of it. Jed and Houellebecq entertain no illusions about humanity’s future and, unlike Djerzinski in *Les particules élémentaires*, Michel in *Plateforme*, or Vincent in *La possibilité d’une île*, they have nothing to offer as a remedy to human sorrow. In some respects, *La carte et le territoire* is a return to the pathos of the author’s first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, where the narrator at story’s end simply accepts that his life is a disappointment. Where the unnamed protagonist of *Extension* declares “tout ce qui aurait pu être source de participation, de plaisir, d’innocente harmonie sensorielle, est devenu source de souffrance et de malheur” (Houellebecq, 1994, p. 180), the Houellebecq of *La carte et le territoire* answers back, “rien de ce que j’espérais dans ma jeunesse ne s’est produit.” The author has come full circle, if not emotionally, at least aesthetically, so much so that we wonder what he might have left to say in the future.

Houellebecq appears finally to have resigned himself to extinction, even if he is able to describe that resignation as “serein et apaisé” (Houellebecq 2010c). This change in tone may represent an evolution in the author’s thinking, but in another sense it seems to suggest something more akin to creative exhaustion. Prix Goncourt jurist and novelist Tahar ben Jelloun, in a review article published in August 2010 in *La Repubblica*, even goes so far as to accuse Houellebecq of lack of imagination. Jelloun summarizes *La carte et le territoire* as follows:

Some chat on the human condition, an affected writing style that pretends toward the clean and the technically proficient, a pretence that summons up real characters and mixes them with others he has invented himself, a bit of publicity for a few consumer products.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ I am citing a translation of Jelloun’s comments in the following article from *The Guardian*: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/aug/31/michel-houellebecq-novel-critical-fire>

Jelloun's grumpiness about Houellebecq's literary quirks is nothing new; we find comparable attacks against the author's supposed dilettantism and lack of stylistic bravado in Eric Nalleau's heinous 2005 effort *Au secours: Houellebecq revient*, which appeared just before the publication of *La possibilité d'une île*. In 2006, the late John Updike jumped on the anti-Houellebecq bandwagon (if it is permitted to use that term) with a review of *Possibilité* that described Houellebecq's imagination as "airless" and "oppressive," (Updike, 2006) and other English-speaking reviewers, including William Cloonan (2006) and Stefan Beck (2006), have issued similar condemnations. Most of the negative press about Houellebecq (and, indeed, most of it is negative) repeats the same sorts of criticisms: that the author is self-obsessed, that his worldview is circumscribed by an unyielding and unjustifiable pessimism, that he offers no solutions to the problems he poses, that he is nothing more than a very talented provocateur, a sexist, a racist, and so on, *ad nauseum*. The press seems never to tire of publishing the same review each time Houellebecq produces a new novel, and while the "official critique" of Houellebecq may have its merits, the political correctness of Updike, Jelloun, and a whole host of other reviewers has become old hat, not to mention boring.¹⁵⁰

Still, Jelloun and Updike do have a point about imagination, even if they are wrong to doubt Houellebecq's overall talents as a writer. The aptitude for critique is a specific form of intelligence, and Houellebecq has it in spades. He is, moreover, original in his criticism; in Houellebecq's writing we find a unique and seductive fusion of

¹⁵⁰ In his review "Futile Attraction: Houellebecq's Lovecraft," novelist John Banville offers an interesting counterpoint to Updike's reading. Banville writes, "Houellebecq, if we are to take him at his word and not think ourselves mocked by his fanciful flights, achieves a profound insight into the nature of our collective death wish, as well as our wistful hope for something to survive, even if that something is not ourselves" (Banville, 2005). Like me, Banville is the sort of author and thinker who takes Houellebecq seriously. Updike, however, is not, and the fact that his review, not Banville's, appeared in *The New Yorker* (Banville's appeared in *Book Forum*) probably speaks volumes about how prepared American culture is to accept the moral gravity of Houellebecq's work.

creativity, condemnation, and humor that guarantees the author his place in the French literary canon. *La carte et le territoire* is another chapter in Houellebecq's unflagging critique of the West's shortcomings, and it should be required reading for anyone who has a stake in the future of liberal society. Nonetheless, the pointing out of the world's flaws, no matter how much imagination goes into the effort, does not embody imagination in the full sense, no more than an engineer's skills can be judged by his ability to demolish a bridge. Houellebecq is a complainer of majestic proportions; but he is still just that—a complainer—and the world may soon tire of him, if it has not begun to already. It is telling that *La carte et le territoire* should begin with this exergue from Charles d'Orléans:

*Le monde est ennuyé de moy,
Et moi pareillement de luy.*

It is difficult to feel optimism for Michel Houellebecq; he lays all the groundwork for a beautiful redemption of the world, but he lacks the moral courage and spiritual conviction to see it through. To read him is like reading *Crime and Punishment* without Raskolnikov's awakening at the end. There is something aborted about the author's work, and while his novels compel us, rarely do they ennoble us. Houellebecq is a brilliant stylist and thinker, but whether he ever manages to move beyond his doubts remains uncertain.

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