Academia and Society:
Reading Michel Houellebecq's *Submission* as an Academic Novel

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Michel Houellebecq's 2015 novel *Soumission* (*Submission*)[1] is open to multiple interpretations that branch out in many directions. One approach is to read the novel as a satire on French society that traces the disintegration of the traditional political body in the face of the challenges currently facing France and the rest of Europe. As such, the novel raises issues like immigration, multiculturalism, the dissolution of the nation state, the vision of the European Union, and the state of identity, ethnicity, and religion in France.[2] The novel also touches on recurring themes that appear throughout Houellebecq's body of work: the crisis besetting Western civilization, particularly in light of the dissolution of communal ties; the effects of individualism, consumerism, and liberalism on intimate relationships; and how economic competition and market logic influence individuals' relationships to society and to one another (Novak-Lechevalier; van der Goot). Houellebecq's ambiguous and controversial public posturing, which has earned him multiple accusations of Islamophobia, provides an additional context for interpreting the novel. Govand Khalid Azeez's reading of *Submission*, for example, is largely based on Houellebecq's media presence, paratextual and non-literary materials, and the blurred boundaries between the author and his characters.[3] Sana Alaya Seghair, whose article presents an overview of research that considers the novel Islamophobic, applies Bronner's notions of the cognitive market of ideas, beliefs, knowledge, and hypotheses to contend that Houellebecq expresses *prêt-à-penser* ideas about Islam that adhere to the prevalent market of ideas (Seghair 248).[4] Thus, Houellebecq's intentional efforts to cultivate a literary position marked by opacity and equivocation, coupled with an evasiveness that serves to further mislead and confuse, have led to a widespread perception of the author as a provocative and confrontational figure (Betty 41).

Submission relates an alternative history of France, in which the struggling Republican Party and the Socialists join forces with the Muslim Brotherhood party to defeat the radical right during the 2022 presidential elections. Their victory has shocking ramifications. While the newly elected

[1] An English translation by Lorin Stein was published in 2016. All subsequent English quotations are taken from this translation.
[2] See, for example, Claudia Franziska Brühwiler, Antonio Scurati.
[3] For more examples, see Jérôme Meizoz, Ashley Harris, and Raphaël Baroni.
[4] The claim that Houellebecq is an écrivain médiatique 'media writer' (Harris) or transmédiatique 'transmedia writer' (Baroni) suggests that the full range of the author's media presence is always taken into consideration by default, and that Houellebecq participates in the creation of his public image, transforming himself into the constructed role.

president initially appears moderate and levelheaded, the Muslim theocracy he establishes ceases to represent the values of the secular state. It complicates French political life and challenges France's traditional republican values. Women are banned from the workplace and required to wear veils over their faces; all citizens receive free primary education, but secondary and university education is privatized; institutions become Islamized; polygamy and child marriage are legalized. All these events are woven into a plot narrated by François, a forty-something university professor who specializes in the writings of Joris-Karl Huysmans.

Reflecting the novel's satirical dimension, I propose another interpretation, one which reads *Submission* as an academic novel of sorts, wherein French academia is the focus of the critique. I propose that the political intrigue in which François is embroiled and his colleagues' reactions—or lack thereof—to the shocking events taking place outside the university gates serve as the background to a critique of the "bon à rien" (*Submission* 1, citing Huysmans's *En route*) 'good for nothings' (1), that is, the intellectual elites who prove to be indifferent, inept, and disinterested in voicing an opinion.[5] When they do speak out, it is only in the interest of their own personal objectives (Rousseau 121; Knausgaard; Michel; Morrey 349).[6] Houellebecq satirizes the academic sphere as being impaired by a collective impracticality with respect to its fundamental societal mission and political role in times of social turmoil. *Submission* manifests all the elements of an academic novel but is much more ambitious in its goals: Houellebecq's denunciation of French academia illustrates the profound disconnection of French society from the values of the French Republic. Academics are thus portrayed as feeble cogs in a seemingly failing system,[7] a symptom of French society's disconnection from its roots. Even though they, of all people, should know and remember the details of French history and uphold the principles upon which French society was founded, they prove fatally myopic and fail to see the looming forest for the petty, self-interested trees.[8]

Read as a satire, *Submission* is faithful to the author's signature postmodernist poetics of destabilization and deconstruction (Buchweitz 1-44). The novel's structural framework relies on an apparent "constitutive

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[5] As Guillaume Rousseau notes, Houellebecq hints that the intellectual elite is good for nothing in the epigraph of the novel, an extended citation from Huysmans's *En Route*, where the final words are "bon à rien" (Rousseau 121).

[6] This opinion, voiced by literary critics, is also shared by the general political public. For example, Bruno Roger-Petit proposes that the novel is about the abdication of responsibility and the stepping down of the elites, who have a propensity to collaborate with and submit to any power, provided it is legitimate.

[7] I am indebted to the anonymous reader of this manuscript for this astute, insightful, and important remark.

[8] According to Alberto Spektorowski, this has to do with the loss of meaning, moral and spiritual, as suggested by another plotline in the novel.

ambivalence" (Novak-Lechevalier 154), in the sense that the novelistic techniques undermine the reader's ability to grasp what the book's central thesis might be. Is this speculative novel a scathing critique of reactionary Islam that borders on Islamophobia? Does it present a dystopian vision of France where the religion of Islam represents an attenuating force intended to redeem humankind's relationship with God? Is it meant to deliver a stinging rebuke to the secular state? Does the text exploit Islamophobia to reinforce the argument that France has lost its identity due to immigration and transnationalism? Does it convey misogynist nostalgia for outdated gender roles? Scholars have observed that the layers of irony engulfing the text make it impossible to identify the precise target of the novel's critique (Morrey; Scurati).[9] As Henry F. Smith observes, François's proposition "je ne suis *pour* rien de tout, tu le sais bien" (*Submission* 41, emphasis in the original) 'you know I am not *for* anything' (28) reflects the author's nihilistic stance and narrative techniques (Smith 182).[10]

In a recent open correspondence with Gilles Martin-Chauffier, Houellbecq directly addressed his rejection of and resistance to the prohibitions and injunctions of contemporary culture:

> En somme, j'ai de mon mieux combattu les lois qui me paraissaient contraires à ma conception de la liberté individuelle. Ayant connu une époque où l'on n'interdisait pas assez (je n'ai jamais été 'hostile à la censure sous toutes ses formes'), j'ai été insidieusement plongé dans une époque où l'on interdit trop (je ne comprends toujours pas, par exemple, ce qui justifie de proscrire l'expression d'opinions 'islamophobes'). ("La France" 12)
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> In short, I did my best to combat laws that seemed to me to be contrary to my conception of personal liberty. Having known times when there were not enough restrictions (I've never been "opposed to all forms of censorship"), I've been insidiously plunged into a period where there is too much prohibition (I still don't understand, for example, what justifies the prohibition of expressing "Islamophobic" opinions).[11]

[9] Conversely, others have identified multiple, contradictory targets (see the section dedicated to the novel's critical reception in Antoine Jurga and Sabine van Wesemael, 153-284). Very often these polemical readings are influenced by the public, high-profile personality of the author (Sturli).

[10] The author contends that the precarity of the protagonist stands out as a particularity in the novel, as he formulated in an interview with Valérie Toranian: "Quand on enlève tout à quelqu'un, est-ce qu'il existe encore? […] Je réduis donc mon personnage, je l'anéanitis" (Houellebecq, "Entretien avec Marine" 324) 'When you take everything away from someone, does he still exist? Therefore, I crush my character, I destroy him.'

[11] Author's translation.

In *Submission*, morbid irony (Courteau 84) and cynicism are used to unsettle the reader, spur resistance, counteract interpretation, and elicit awareness of incongruities. For example, François treats the French political elections, the central object of discussion in the novel, as no more than a form of public entertainment, serving as a distraction from his existential mid-life crisis. His cynical remarks dismiss the elections' social consequence and public value and cast doubts about the nature and efficacy of this social apparatus, as illustrated in the following two examples: "J'aurai peut-être mieux fait de m'engager sur le plan politique, les militants des différents formations vivaient en cette période électorale des moments intenses alors que je m'étiolais, ce n'était pas contestable" (38) 'I couldn't get my hopes up. Maybe I should have gotten into politics. If you were a political activist, election season brought moments of intensity, whichever side you were on, and meanwhile here I was, inarguably withering away' (24). François's musings reveal his profound detachment from democratic processes that should concern every citizen. He undermines the elections, suggesting they lack genuine transformative power in society. This cynical perspective highlights the indifference and light-mindedness of a member of the French intellectual circles and foreshadows the ease with which democratic institutions will later collapse in the novel. Similarly, in the next quote, the elections are downplayed and degraded to a mere unnecessary pastime: "En attendant la mort il me restait le *Journal des dix-neuvièmistes*, la prochaine reunion avait lieu dans moins d'une semaine. Il y avait la campagne électorale, aussi. Beaucoup d'hommes s'intéressent à la politique et à la guerre, mais j'appréciais peu ces sources de divertissement" (50) 'While I was waiting to die, I still had the *Journal of Nineteenth-Century Studies*. Its next meeting was in less than a week. Also, election day was coming up. Many men take an interest in politics and war, but these diversions never appealed to me' (37).

François's narrative voice is perhaps the most prominent structural device preventing the reader from identifying a fixed satirical target in the novel. As Douglas Morrey remarks, "the ironic treatment of Houellebecq's narrator means that many of the apparent ideological positions voiced in the novel should be regarded with considerable caution" (350). The reliability of the narrator is constantly brought into question,[12] casting doubt on his propositions and undermining the stances he takes, since it is difficult to decipher the narrative distance between the implied author and the narrator, or the true disposition of the implied author against which the narrator can be evaluated. The unreliable François clearly violates many of today's widely accepted cultural norms and values. Specifically, and most conspicuously, his stance toward women, which he expresses candidly, is informed by a casual patriarchal sexism that most readers would deem categorically unacceptable:

[12] Chantal Michel notes that this is reflected at a basic level in the representation of a literature professor who, in his scholarly readings of Huysmans, confuses the basic distinctions between the discrete conceptual entities of author, narrator, and implied author.

"En réalité je n'ai jamais été persuadé que ce soit une si bonne idée que les femmes puissent voter, suivre les mêmes études que les hommes, accéder au mêmes professions, etc. Enfin on s'y est habitué, mais est-ce que c'est une bonne idée, au fond?" (41) 'I've never really been convinced that it was a good idea for women to get the vote, study the same things as men, go into the same professions, et cetera. I mean, we're used to it now—but was it really a good idea?' (28).

He has transient sexual relationships with his female students, which generally last no longer than the academic year (with the exception of Myriam, to whom he grows attached). This flagrant, self-avowed abuse of power is either an "unwitting self-exposure or unintentional betrayal of personal shortcomings" (Nünning 100), or an intentional attempt to provoke by engaging in unequivocally problematic conduct. By rendering François ethically dubious, Houellebecq undermines his narrator's reliability. In parallel, the credibility of French society is compromised by its readiness to abandon its liberal values and to sacrifice women's rights in exchange for civil peace and prosperity. Furthermore, it will be revealed that, in any event, this same liberal elite never did live up to its self-proclaimed respect for women.

Hence, as a satirical depiction of contemporary France, *Submission* intends to dismantle, unmask, and disturb (Scurati 170-71; Almeida; Blanchard), and the discrepancy between the events and the narrator's account creates an unstable form of tension between certainty and indeterminacy, making it difficult to pinpoint the target of its social critique. However, if we shift our attention to the narrator in his capacity as a member of the academic community, the satire manifestly becomes focused, fixed, and stable.[13] Academia, here, is an unambiguous object of ridicule, the epitome of the social phenomenon the reader is being warned against. If satire offers a critique of specific human behavior by portraying it as ridiculous, then, in this sense, the university is not an incidental setting, but the object of an attack. The vices and whims characteristic of academic life are exposed, and the reader is shown how pseudo-intellectualism serves as a mask behind which academics can hide the decadence of their personal and professional lives, as well as their dealings with larger social issues.

Submission as an Academic Novel

The academic novel[14] is a modern form of literary narrative set within the enclosed world of a college or university, often highlighting the follies of academic life. This type of writing maps the political and social developments of an academic world that "no longer shelters eccentrics of genius" (Showalter

[13] Wayne Booth contends that when irony is stable, it consists of four components: it is preconceived and intended, it is covert and calls for reconstruction through close reading, it is secure once reconstructed; and it is limited in scope and finite in explication (3-30).
[14] Also referred to as Professorroman, university fiction, or campus fiction.

117); it derides the unproductive, useless, or ineffectual character of the faculty and their complete detachment from reality and everyday existence beyond campus life. Recognized in British and American literature as a subgenre of contemporary fiction, the academic novel investigates ethical and philosophical questions endemic to the academic setting as well as shifts of thematic emphasis over the years. Attentive to its temporal context, it constantly represents the most contemporary headlines of higher education—from class and political infighting to feminism, political correctness, identity politics, and multiculturalism (Showalter). In *Submission*, the genre is used to explore academia's relationship with and duty to society.

The narratives of academic novels are constructed around the "constant dialectic between competitiveness and idealism—or scholarship as an end in itself and scholarship as a means to an end" (Janice Rossen qtd. in Showalter 4). In appearance, academic life seems safe and comfortable, an ideal compromise between communal life and individualism. However, while researchers and pedagogues are expected to engage in intellectual discourse with their colleagues, they are, at the same time, forced to compete against each other. Coupled with the reality that the quality of one's research and one's scholarly productivity do not necessarily guarantee professional success, this breeds ruthless rivalry and interpersonal conflicts, which are compounded by fundamental inequalities. Hence, the politics of exclusion, or the perpetual threat of being removed from the community, feature extensively in academic novels, driven by characters' constant fear of failure to secure a tenured post or promotion (Womack 329-40; Showalter 3-5). While the authors of academic novels are often university professors themselves, they may well not be part of the academic community. Regardless, major academic novels use the genre to explore matters that extend beyond the boundaries of the campus and the parody of the academic world (Showalter; Womack). They may challenge the relevance of theories developed and propagated by academics to address issues that "plague the world beyond the halls of the academy" (Womack 335), while questioning the university's competence in engendering social change "when its most cherished principles evince little practical application" (Womack 333).

From the outset, *Submission* presents itself as an academic novel, adhering to the general assumptions and conventions of the genre. The setting and context in which the events unfold is typical of the genre and is foregrounded at the charged points at the beginning and end of the novel. The first chapter chronicles the milestones in François's academic career from its inception, while the last chapter delves into his opportunity to revive his career at the Sorbonne after converting to Islam. The university thus serves as the primary locus of attention and action, both geographically and conceptually. Throughout, Houellebecq refers to several questions revolving around the academic lifecycle, evoking classic themes of the academic novel. One of the issues addressed is academic professionalization, which leads the faculty to develop an attitude of indifference to its student "customers." François himself is a leading example of a faculty member who finds teaching purposeless. He

lectures only one morning a week and has little to do with his students otherwise, nor does he really care whether they find his lectures interesting or not. As he wonders while leaving his class one day, "en quoi les deux vierges en burqa pouvaient-elles être intéressées par Jean Lorrain, ce pédé dégoûtant, qui se proclamait lui-même *enfilanthrope* ? Leur pères étaient-ils au courant du contenu exact de leurs études?"[15] (35, emphasis in the original) 'what did those two virgins in burkas care about that revolting queen, that self-proclaimed analyst, Jean Lorrain? Did their fathers realize what they were reading in the name of literature?' (22). Even though he interacts with them only minimally, he still finds a way to complain about his doctoral students—"c'était deux doctorants maigres et méchants" (53) 'they were bad students with bad attitudes' (40)—who bother him with "des questions oiseues" (53) 'their lazy questions' (40). In his view, the professor's duty to educate the next generation of students constitutes a fall from the golden age of dissertation writing: "Mais tout cela était fini; ma jeunesse, plus généralement, était finie. Bientôt maintenant (et sans doute assez vite), j'allais m'engager dans un processus d'insertion professionnelle. Ce qui ne me réjouissait nullement" (16) 'but that [dissertation writing] was all over now. My entire youth was over. Soon (very soon), I would have to see about entering the workforce. The prospect left me cold' (7).

The perpetual hunt for job security is another looming issue. The fact that tenure and promotion demand constant strategic decision-making is another theme satirized in the novel; such decisions have ethical implications, and the individual must carefully choose their allies and their subject of research. Some advance professionally by using flattery to their advantage rather than by meeting objective standards of excellence, as is the case with Steve, who is granted tenure even though "On pouvait se demander comment il avait accédé au statut de maître de conférences alors qu'il n'avait rien publié, dans aucune revue importante ni même de second plan, et qu'il n'était l'auteur que d'une vague thèse sur Rimbaud, *sujet bidon* par excellence" (28, emphasis in the original) 'It was an open question how he'd been named a senior lecturer when he'd never published in an important journal, or even a minor one, and when all he'd written was a vague dissertation on Rimbaud, a *bogus topic* if ever there was one' (17). According to François, Steve climbed up the academic ladder thanks to his excellent sexual performance as former university president Chantal Delouze's lover. All faculty members in the novel engage in this kind of wheeling and dealing, competing over academic positions, contracts, salaries,

[15] The fact that he refers to students of a particular gender and religion, as opposed to the student body in general, is an example of why Houellebecq has been accused of Islamophobia not only in the media but also in the legal sphere, with legal action taken against the author by Muslim leaders. The author himself added fuel to the flames of controversy in his 2022 interview with Michel Onfray in *Front Populaire*. In his most recent nonfiction publication, *Quelques mois dans ma vie*, Houellebecq recounts the aftermath of this legal proceeding and contends that *Submission* is not at all Islamophobic but ambivalent to the very last detail (11).

and benefits. The cumbersome process of writing and research is also addressed: as François puts it, "j'avançais sur l'établissement de l'appareil des notes mais j'étais toujours en panne pour la préface" (274) 'I made progress on the footnotes, but I got stuck working on the introduction' (225), as well as the limited reading audience for scholarship in publications that are *de facto* "confidentielle" (114) 'under the radar' (91).

Submission presents the ethical aspects of an academic career against the backdrop of the financial and social issues that influence the contemporary academia reality, namely global economic downturns and budgetary cuts, as well as growing social divides on campus and the increasingly extreme nature of identity politics and cancel culture.

Mostly, however, the novel weaves a representation of academic life through the depiction of events unfolding outside the campus gates. By soaring above the confines of the campus, *Submission* offers insight into the connection between the intellectual world and social politics, interlacing internal academic politics with the radical political developments taking place outside. The two contexts are manifestly juxtaposed, and the novel concentrates on the nature of this connection. The novel circumscribes, complicates, and reexamines the place of academia and its relation to political trends and upheavals through a series of scenes reflecting the ironic notion that "que l'histoire politique puisse jouer un rôle dans ma propre vie continuait à me déconcerter, et à me répugner un peu" (116) 'The idea that political history could play any part in my own life was still disconcerting and slightly repellent' (92). It thus raises the question of academic responsibility toward society, especially in times of crisis. Evidently, the novel's "Republic of Science"[16] ignores political reality even when the latter encroaches upon its hallowed halls of learning. The contrast between what is happening within and without the academy creates a sense of absurd disconnection, and when the political turmoil can no longer be ignored, François draws a comparison between the students and their professors, emphasizing their dissimilarities. Regarding his postgraduate students, he observes that: "aussi amorphes et dépolitisés soient-ils, ils semblaient ce jour-là tendus, anxieux (78) 'even the most apathetic and apolitical looked tense, anxious' (61), as opposed to his colleagues who continue to be mired in apathy:

> J'étais par contre frappé par l'atonie de mes collègues. Pour eux il ne semblait y avoir aucun problème, ils ne se sentaient nullement concernés, ce qui ne faisait que confirmer ce que je pensais depuis des années: ceux qui parviennent à un statut d'enseignant universitaire n'imaginent même pas qu'une évolution politique puisse avoir le

[16] See Polanyi's 1962 article "The Republic of Science," suggesting that "the community of scientists is organized in a way which resembles certain features of a body politic and works according to economic principles similar to those by which the production of material goods is regulated" (54).

> moindre effet sur leur carrière: ils se sentent absolument intouchables. (78-9)
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> I was equally struck by my colleagues' lack of concern. They seemed completely unworried, as if none of this had anything to do with them. It only confirmed what I'd always thought—that, for all their education, university professors can't even imagine political developments having any effect on their careers: they consider themselves untouchable. (61)

By comparing the discerning students with the unperceptive professors, the narrator exposes the latter's parochial, sectarian motivations. Not only are the professors indifferent and complacent about the political consequences of the situation, but their concerns are limited to their own egocentric world, in which they prefer to ignore societal concerns altogether. As Chantal Michel notes, "en temps de crise, mus par la peur, résignés ou apathiques, François et ses collègues ne songent qu'à leur survie et à leur intérêt et ils se contentent d'espérer le retour d'un monde sûr" (25) 'in times of crisis, fear-driven, resigned, and apathetic, François and his colleagues think only of their personal survival and interests, and do little more than hope for the return of a safe world.'[17]

As an academic novel, *Submission* reexamines the humanities' responsibility and commitment to society, along with their complex relationship with national politics. Houellebecq thus challenges his readers to question some of the basic concepts and premises shaping today's academic environment. Naturally, academia is susceptible to off-campus politicization, since, as discussed, irrespective of its elevated status, it is a sphere dominated by high-stakes competition with colleagues struggling for success. In a fundamentally unequal space, where the quality of one's scholarship is not always the decisive factor, joining in on political trends is a way to secure status and promotion.

In examining the role of academia, Houellebecq leads us in two different directions. On the one hand, academia is over-involved in external national politics in terms of the influence the latter has on research and education. On the other hand, it is under-involved in local political life, which amounts to the ivory tower disengaging from the teeming reality below it. Both have grave consequences in terms of social irresponsibility and susceptibility to being manipulated by outside interests.

Over-involvement

The flagrant politicization of academia is embodied by the academic who serves political interests or seeks promotion by associating with those boasting money and power. Such academics are "motivated less by faith and service than by ambition and the longing for power" (Showalter 119). François himself evinces this propensity when he imagines his own path to promotion:

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[17] Author's translation. See also Edith Perry's analysis.

> Depuis quelques semaines on reparlait d'un projet vieux d'au moins quatre ou cinq ans concernant l'implantation d'une réplique de la Sorbonne à Dubaï (ou au Bahrein ? ou au Qatar ? je les confondais). Un projet similaire était à l'étude avec Oxford, l'ancienneté de nos deux universités avait dû séduire une pétromonarchie quelconque. Dans cette perspective, certainement prometteuse d'opportunités financières réelles pour un jeune maître de conférences, *envisageait-il de se mettre sur les rangs en affichant de positions antisionistes ? Et pensait-il que j'avais intérêt à adopter la même attitude?* (30–31)
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> Lately there had been more talk about a project, first proposed four or five years ago, to create a replica of the Sorbonne in Dubai (or was it Bahrain? Qatar? I always get them mixed up). Oxford had a similar plan in the works. Clearly the antiquity of our two universities had caught some petromonarch's eye. If the project went through, there'd be real financial opportunities for a young lecturer like Steve. *Had he considered throwing his hat into the ring with a little anti-Zionist agitation? And did he think there might be anything in it for me*? (18–19, emphasis added)

Such opportunism is exemplified in *Submission* chiefly by academics who take part in efforts to boycott Israel as a stepping stone to academic promotion and then promulgate the Islamic party's ideas in writing and in action. The career of François's superior—the newly appointed university president Professor Rediger—is marked by direct involvement in politics: "Une recherche de deux minutes à peine m'apprit que Robert Rediger était célèbre pour ses positions propalestiniennes, et qu'il avait été l'un des principaux artisans du boycott des universitaires israéliens" (37) 'A two-minute search revealed that Robert Rediger was famously pro-Palestinian, and that he'd helped orchestrate the boycott against the Israelis' (23). As a reward for converting to Islam and promoting Islamic politics, Rediger is not only granted a professorship but is appointed president of the university after the Sorbonne is purchased by the Saudi government. Later, following the elections, he is compensated for his loyalty by being appointed Minister of Higher Education: "Il venait d'être nommé à la fonction de secrétaire d'état aux Universités, *recréée pour l'occasion*" (270) 'Rediger had been named secretary of universities—*a post they'd revived just for him*' (221, emphasis added). Rediger's political bias is accompanied by inaccuracies in his research. As he admits to François, "j'ai obtenu mon doctorat; mais ce n'était pas une très bonne thèse. Bien inférieure à la vôtre, en tout cas. Disons que je sollicitais un peu les textes, comme on dit" (245) 'they gave me my doctorate, but it wasn't much of a thesis. Nothing like yours. Anyway. My reading was, as they say, selective' (200). Once appointed university president, Rediger declares that in order to work at the Sorbonne, one must convert to Islam. To protect their personal interests, faculty members are

forced to comply and thus contribute to the dismantling of the secular republic, which enables the Islamic regime to tighten its grip over French culture.

Money, in this case Saudi money, not only dictates a specific lifestyle but has considerable bearing on research and teaching. The quality of academic research drops, and the professors disengage even more from their students, becoming indifferent to the quality of education. When Rediger offers François a teaching post, he tells him he had wanted to recruit "enseignants réellement respectés, bénéficiant d'une vraie stature internationale" (248) 'truly eminent [scholars], who have real international reputations' (202). He goes on to admit his failure to enlist such talent and instead offers the position, which comes with a hefty salary, to François. He concedes that a teaching position at the Sorbonne no longer carries the prestige it once did but makes a promise: "votre véritable travail ne soit pas perturbé. Vous n'auriez à assurer que des cours facile […] l'assistance aux doctorants […] vous serait épargné" (248) 'nothing would be allowed to interfere with your real work [….] No hard classes [….] No dissertations to advise' (202). Essentially, Rediger wants François to serve as the crumbling university's window dressing; by liberating François from his obligation to the students, Rediger is thus relieving François of his responsibility to society. Consequently, any responsible scientific work produced by François and his colleagues will have limited readership by definition, while ideas that purport to shape society are disseminated and popularized by less responsible academics, as evidenced by Rediger's book on Islam, *Dix questions sur l'islam*.

University administrators are quick to adopt national political trends, ostensibly for the benefit of their institutions but admittedly at the expense of specific student populations:

> D'après Steve, un accord avait d'ailleurs été conclu entre les mouvements des jeunes Salafistes et les autorités universitaires, il en voyait preuve que les voyous et les dealers avaient complètement disparu, depuis deux ans déjà, des abords de la fac. L'accord comportait-il une clause interdisant l'accès de la fac aux organisations juives? […] l'Union des étudiants juifs de France n'était plus représentée, depuis la dernière rentrée, sur aucun campus de la région parisienne, alors que la section jeunesse de la Fraternité musulmane avait, un peu partout, multiplié ses antennes. (34)

> According to Steve, an agreement had been struck between the young Salafists and the administration. All of a sudden, two years ago, the hoodlums and dealers had all vanished from the neighborhood. Supposedly that was the proof. Had this agreement included a clause banning Jewish organizations from campus? […] as of last fall, the Jewish Students Union had no representatives on any Paris campus, while the youth division of the Muslim Brotherhood had opened new branches here and there, across the city. (21)

The over-involvment in politics depicted in *Submission* presents a critique of academic complicity in political transformation. Personal ambition trumps intellectual integrity when academics align with power for advancement. In turn, it corrupts educational institutions, leading to diminished research quality and student neglect. By depicting professors who convert to Islam for career preservation, Houellebecq illustrates how academic capitulation facilitates cultural transformation. The university becomes a microcosm of broader societal surrender, where intellectual responsibility is abandoned for personal gain.

Under-involvement

The under-involvement or depoliticization of academia is the most heavily satirized contemporary trend in *Submission* in the sense of the faculty's seclusion in its ivory tower and insulation from the real world roiling outside its ramparts. François openly admits that politics and history do not interest him: "je me sentais aussi politisé qu'une serviette de toilette" (50) 'I was about as political as a bath towel' (37). He merely observes events. Although he does wonder whether it was really the end for the two parties that had dominated French political life since the Fifth Republic, he never takes a stand either way. Although able to assign meaning to texts and make connections between authors, periods, and ideas, he exhibits impatience and impotence in the face of the concrete collapse of the democratic system. He views himself as a spectator rather than a participant:

> J'aimais depuis toujours les soirées d'élection présidentielle; je crois même qu'à l'exception des finales de coupe du football, c'était mon programme télévisé favori. Le suspense était évidemment moins fort, les élections obéissent à ce dispositif singulier d'une histoire dont le dénouement est connu dès la première minute; mais l'extrême diversité des intervenants (les politologues, les éditorialistes politiques 'de premier plan', les foules militants en liesse ou en pleurs au siège de leurs partis… les hommes politiques enfin, leurs déclarations à chaud, réfléchies ou émues), l'excitation générale des participants donnaient vraiment cette impression si rare, si précieuse, si télégénique, de vivre un moment historique en direct. (74)

> I'd always loved election night. I'd go so far as to say it's my favorite TV show, after the World Cup finals. Obviously there was less suspense in elections, since, according to their peculiar narrative structure, you knew from the first minutes how they would end, but the wide range of actors (the political scientists, the pundits, the crowds of supporters cheering or in tears at their party headquarters … and the politicians, in the heat of the moment, with their thoughtful or passionate declarations)

> and the general excitement of the participants really gave you the feeling, so rare, so precious, so telegenic, that history was coming to you live. (58)

The irony here is that François employs the tools of the literary critic to relate to election night, only to miss the picture altogether. In a *reductio ad absurdum*, instead of addressing the content of election night and the weighty issues at stake, the elections represent for the narrator a genre of television programming with a distinct narrative structure. Hence, François analyzes the generic techniques used to produce the impression of a historic moment, as if all of it were nothing more than a demonstration of pragmatic poetics. As a university professor, François preserves the inalienable assets of an expansive French culture but exhibits a lack of interest in reality; consequently, he and his ilk are irrelevant to political life.

In his efforts to avoid getting involved or contaminated by reality, François goes so far as to flee to the provinces. His profound apathy is displayed in a scene that inverts moral hierarchies: hungry and running out of gas, François stops at a gas station to refill his tank and finds that it has been looted. Discovering the cashier lying on the floor in a pool of blood, he does not flinch: "Après une brève hésitation, je pris dans les rayonnages un sandwich thon crudités, une bière sans alcool et le guide Michelin" (129) 'After a moment's hesitation, I helped myself to a tuna-vegetable sandwich from the sandwich shelf, a non-alcoholic beer, and a Michelin guide' (104). The corpse fails to elicit any further attention or action and the protagonist hesitates due solely to his inability to pay in the absence of a cash register or a cashier to take his money. The scene functions as a satirical hyperbolic subversion accentuating societal aversion. And François is not alone in his apathy:

> Pendant plusieurs années, et sans doute même plusieurs dizaines d'années, Le Monde, ainsi plus généralement que tous les journaux de centre-gauche, c'est-à-dire en réalité tous les journaux, avaient régulièrement dénoncé les 'Cassandres' qui prévoyaient une guerre civile entre les immigrés musulmans et les populations autochtones d'Europe occidentale. Comme me l'avait expliqué un de mes collègues qui enseignait la littérature grecque, cette utilisation du mythe de Cassandre était au fond curieuse […] En somme, Cassandre offrait l'exemple de prédictions pessimistes constamment réalisées, et il semblait bien, à voir les faits; que les journalistes de contre-gauche ne fassent que répéter l'aveuglement des Troyens. (55-6)

> For years now, probably decades, *Le Monde* and all the other center-left newspapers… had been denouncing the "Cassandras" who predicted civil war between Muslim immigrants and the indigenous populations of Western Europe. The way it was explained to me by my colleague in the classics department, this was an odd allusion to make […] In short,

> Cassandra offered an example of worst-case predictions that always came true. In hindsight, the journalists of the center-left seemed only to have repeated the blindness of the Trojans. (41-2)

The French newspapers dismiss the prophets of doom as "Cassandras," preferring to ignore tumultuous social tensions. Yet, François's colleagues only address this issue in relation to their expertise. One of them, an expert in Greek mythology, contends that the allusion to the myth is inaccurate and therefore impertinent. Such academics prove unable to relate to the context in which the myth is being evoked, i.e., the Muslim party seizing control of the state. Instead, they split hairs over the modern use of the mythological figure's name. The professors' understanding of the situation remains abstract, and they do not apply their knowledge to draw conclusions about reality, staunchly refusing to be political in the most practical sense of the term. It is worth noting that François entertains these musings on his way to a party held at the Museum of Romantic Life, ironically emphasizing academics' disconnection from contemporary reality and their preference to immerse themselves in more comfortable epochs. By hyper-inflating and caricaturizing the disengaged academics, Houellebecq suggests that they are party to the usurpation and inversion of everything France stands for.

In another scene, François acknowledges that the political events happening across France are important enough to justify making the effort to watch a television debate between the election candidates, which he intends to do while eating a microwave dinner. Again, in an inversion of hierarchies, the fateful and the serious are juxtaposed with the trivial and the banal, the latter eventually prevailing. Although François has decided that it is important to watch the debate, he gets caught up in the problem of how to heat his dinner after his microwave malfunctions and misses the televised event altogether.

Academia's Betrayal of Duty

Over- and under-involvement in politics are both ways in which academia—the humanities, in particular—betrays society. Society relies on academia for knowledge production, preservation, and dissemination. The university fails in its duty if it becomes too deeply enmeshed in or completely indifferent to politics. The French academic, as portrayed in the novel, however, feels no obligation to anything, not even to social democracy, which is on the verge of collapse. The very purpose of university studies is parodied *ad absurdum* in the following extract, where François disavows *a priori* the relevance of knowledge acquired in the humanities:

> Les études universitaires dans le domaine des lettres ne conduisent comme on le sait à peu près à rien, sinon pour les étudiants les plus doués à une carrière d'enseignement universitaire dans le domaine des lettres—on a en somme la situation plutôt cocasse d'un système n'ayant

> d'autre objectif que sa propre reproduction […] Elles ne sont cependant pas nuisibles, et peuvent même présenter une utilité marginale. Une jeune fille postulant à un emploi de vendeuse chez Céline ou chez Hermès devra naturellement, et en tout premier lieu, soigner sa présentation; mais une licence ou un mastère de lettres modernes pourra constituer un atout secondaire garantissant à l'employeur, à défaut de compétences utilisables, une certaine agilité intellectuelle laissant présager la possibilité d'une évolution de carrière—la littérature, en outre, étant depuis toujours assortie d'une connotation positive dans le domaine de l'industrie du luxe. (17)
>
> The academic study of literature leads basically nowhere, as we all know. Unless you happen to be an especially gifted student, in which case it prepares you for a career teaching the academic study of literature—it is, in other words, a rather farcical system that exists solely to replicate itself […] Still, it's harmless, and can even have a certain marginal value. A young woman applying for a sales job at Céline or Hermès should naturally attend to her appearance above all; but a degree in literature can constitute a secondary asset since it guarantees the employer, in the absence of any useful skills, a certain intellectual agility that could lead to professional development—besides which, literature has always carried positive connotations in the world of luxury goods. (8)

According to this logic, if the social democratic state funds higher education, it is reasonable for it to expect some kind of benefit in return. Otherwise, higher education in the humanities does nothing more than perpetuate itself without producing any practical value. Houellebecq thus challenges us to think of higher education as a commodity that offers a low return on investment. If all that interests François is his "friend" Huysmans, then he and his colleagues fail to fulfill the promise with which they have been entrusted: they have no social impact and are incapable of being agents of change.

At several points along the narrative, François refers directly to his peers' disavowal of their responsibility to society, which accompanies the intellectual elite's powerlessness and insignificance in the sociopolitical environment: "L'intellectuel en France n'avait pas à être *responsable*, ce n'était pas dans sa nature" (271, emphasis in the original) 'For the French, an intellectual didn't have to be *responsible*, that wasn't his job' (221). Elsewhere, in a moment of candid insight and self-appraisal, the narrator-protagonist asserts: "Une protestation même unanime des enseignants universitaires serait passée à peu près complètement inaperçue; mais ça, en Arabie saoudite, ils ne pouvaient apparemment pas s'en rendre compte. Au fond, ils croyaient encore au pouvoir de l'élite intellectuelle, c'en était presque touchant" (179) 'Even if all the university teachers in France had risen up in protest, almost nobody would have noticed, but apparently they hadn't found that out in Saudi Arabia,

they still believed, deep down, in the power of the intellectual elite, it was almost touching' (147).

The novel's last sentence reinforces its satirical target; François tells us that if he chose to return to university and continue with his academic work, "je n'aurais rien à regretter" (300) 'I would have nothing to mourn' (246). Written entirely in the present conditional tense, the last segment relates how the professor willfully agrees to succumb to the new order, which, by definition, is aimed at restricting academic work and circumscribing scientific outcomes. However, in order to secure his return to academia, Francois must convert to Islam:

> La cérémonie de la conversion, en elle-même, serait très simple; elle se déroulerait probablement à la Grande mosquée de Paris, c'était plus pratique pour tout le monde. Vu ma relative importance le recteur serait présent, ou du moins l'un de ses collaborateurs proches. Rediger serait là aussi, bien entendu. Le nombre d'assistants n'était de toute façon pas imposé; il y aurait d'ailleurs sans doute aussi quelques fidèles ordinaires, la mosquée n'était pas fermée pour l'occasion, c'était un témoignage que je devais porter devant mes nouveaux frères musulmans, mais égaux devant Dieu. (297)
>
> The conversion ceremony itself would be very simple. Most likely it would take place at the Paris Mosque, since that was easiest for all involved. Given my relative importance, the dean would be there, or at least one of his senior staff. Rediger would be there, too, of course. The number of guests was entirely up to me; no doubt there would be a few ordinary worshippers as well: the mosque wouldn't close for the occasion. The idea was that I should bear witness in front of my new Muslim brothers, my equals in the sight of God. (244)

The novel's final chord follows Molière's satirical tradition of ending a work with an anointment ceremony in order to provide the audience with a happy ending at all costs, as improbable, farfetched, or disingenuous as it might be.[18] The professor being reincarnated as a Muslim brother embodies the currents that run contrary to each other: with his conversion, François transitions from the under-involved academic to the over-involved, politicized one. Nonetheless, the use of the conditional or hypothetical mode in this passage emphasizes the novel's ambivalence. While the ceremony itself would be a seal of unequivocal, institutional affirmation, the passage's grammatical structure betrays

[18] See Walter Kerr.

uncertainty and equivocation, a final satirical note that does not quite resolve into any positive statement.[19]

In *Submission*, academia is rendered the target of a series of situational and essential stable ironies that demonstrate how the self-absorbed academic succumbs to the systematic dismantling of the secular republic's basic values. The conventions of the academic novel genre, along with its acerbic tone and satirical inclination, provide a context for inquiries and provocative suggestions regarding the ramifications of an elite that at times of ambivalence and uncertainty abandons its social responsibilities. Academics who refuse to be political subjects and reject autonomous agency outside their academic expertise, as well as those who exploit political ideologies for self-promotion, are portrayed as intellectually insignificant and politically detrimental. The consequences of the academics' neglect of their duties, however, go far beyond the gates of academia, with dire repercussions for the entire body politic.

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[19] See Mănăstire on the relationship between the incipit and the excipit in Houellebecq. Mănăstire highlights the decisive role of the entrance into and exit from Houellebecq's fictional universes in the codification and thematization of the narrative (127–45).

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