

The worst fate a writer can suffer is to become a “writer”: for ease to eclipse inspiration, for fluency to allay the long struggle with words, for the dreadful void of the inchoate work to become schematic and ho-hum, like an instruction manual. Yet the writer-as-cultural-figure is an inevitable facet of the present, when the commodification of literature and the general flattening of news, entertainment, and what was once known as high culture into a vague but ubiquitous entity called media has led to writers vying for “exposure” alongside politicians and athletes. A similar set of factors leads to writers overstaying their welcome: readers and publishers are more comfortable with a known quantity than something undigested, and writers themselves grow inured to a measure of wealth and attention that are, it seems, not easy to give up. As a consequence, the ravaged, naked bitterness Adorno saw as characteristic of the late style are frequently replaced by undisciplined prose, a profusion of parentheses, a more or less pathetic drive to keep current, and an overreliance on cliché.

That such traits are not more readily indicted speaks to the timidity of many critics (or, just as likely, to their not having read the books under review), to the power of certain authors or publishers, or to the fact that in many cases, critics fail to recognize a writer’s early talent and feel compelled to compensate later. The last is perhaps the case with Michel Houellebecq. His brilliance was already evident in his early collections of poetry and his haunting, idiosyncratic biography of Lovecraft, *Against the World, Against Life*. Though his first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (translated into English as *Whatever*) obtained a cult following, selling 30,000 copies over the course of four years, it was not until 1998, with the publication of *The Elementary Particles*, that Houellebecq obtained true success. There followed two brilliant, popular, and controversial books, *Platform* and *The Possibility of an Island*. Taken together, the three offered a moving, acerbic portrait of the collapse of love under global capitalism and confirmed Houellebecq’s reputation as one of France’s most important contemporary writers.

For more than a decade, Houellebecq has enjoyed unusual notoriety: his dismissal from the board of the review *Perpétuaire* for the reactionary, racist views allegedly expressed in *The Elementary Particles* made the front page of *Le Monde*; his portrayal of Islam in *Platform*, as well as his subsequent description of it in an interview as “the most moronic religion,” landed him in court on charges of inciting racial hatred; in 2011, he went missing, stoking fears he’d been snatched up for ransom. He would dramatize his disappearance in the faux documentary *The Kidnapping of Michel Houellebecq*.

In 2010, he won the Prix Goncourt for his widely praised but pedestrian novel *The Map and the Territory*. It was not Houellebecq’s best, but there was a sense that his hour had arrived, particularly as great contention had surrounded his failure to obtain the prize for the infinitely superior *Elementary Particles* in 1998. Among the book’s few detractors was Tahar Ben Jelloun, a member of the Goncourt jury, who dismissed it as “chatter about the human condition,” lacking in imagination.

None of this was comparable to the commotion that would arise when *Submission*, Houellebecq’s most recent novel, hit the shelves on January 7 of this year, a few hours before Chérif and Saïd Kouachi would burst into the offices of the satirical paper Charlie

Hebdo and murder twelve people. Coincidentally, the cover for the issue released that day featured a portrait of Houellebecq in a magician's garb, offering a pair of predictions: "In 2015, I lose my teeth. In 2022, I do Ramadan." (Charlie Hebdo was running behind: it has been years since Houellebecq's mouth could confidently be described as containing *teeth*.) That week, *Soumission* sold 150,000 copies. Mark Lilla classed it alongside *The Magic Mountain* and *The Man Without Qualities*. Marine Le Pen, seemingly oblivious to the absurd figure she cuts in its pages, marshaled Houellebecq her cause, calling the *Submission* "a work of fiction that could one day become a reality."

The plot is fairly simple: in the year 2022, François, a horny literature professor and expert on Huysmans, finds himself at the end of his existential rope. At the same time, the center-left and center-right parties, in order to prevent the National Front's Marine Le Pen from winning the presidency, unite to back Ben Abbes, a candidate from the Muslim Brotherhood, a moderate Muslim party that controls around twenty percent of the electorate. Unlike the traditional parties, which have progressively cut public benefits, Ben Abbes sees education as the key to forging a new culture, and he cedes the other ministries to his partners in the coalition in exchange for control over the schools. With money from Saudi Arabia, Ben Abbes renovates the Sorbonne, laying off secular professors with generous retirement packages and replacing them with believers. François accepts a pension, takes a trip to an abbey in the country, and returns to find himself wooed by the university's new president. Offered a salary three times his pension, promised a trio of attractive young wives, convinced, moreover, that secular Europe is on its last legs and that the time has come to switch to the winning team, François accepts the president's offer. The book ends with his vision of himself converting in the Great Mosque, giving a speech in front of his colleagues, and eyeing up his pretty, veiled students, each of whom "would be proud and happy if I chose her, and would feel honored to share my bed."

In interviews, Houellebecq has stated that his initial design for the novel involved a conversion to Catholicism, modeled on the one Huysmans depicts in the autobiographical Durtal novels. It is true that Islam as such takes up little room in the book, serving mainly as the counterpoint to the author's vision of an occident in irrevocable decline. The arguments Houellebecq adduces for his pessimism are familiar to anyone who has read Bernard Lewis, Martin Amis's *Second Plane*, or the authors associated with the so-called Eurabia thesis: European institutions are weak and decrepit, their artificial values fundamentally estranged from the real issues that govern people's lives; the Muslim population is growing while Europeans are failing to replace themselves; in brief, in the words of one of Houellebecq's characters, a *normalien* described as possessing "almost abnormal brain power," "whichever segment of the population has the highest birthrate, and does the best job of transmitting its values, wins."

The archetypal Houellebecq protagonist follows one of two routes: either he fails to evolve, and his picaresque adventures become a pretext for more or less biting observations about contemporary life (*Whatever, Lanzarote*), or he moves from muted anguish about his lovelessness and the deplorable state of the western world into wan, often lyrical resignation (*The Elementary Particles, The Possibility of an Island*).

*Submission* is in the second camp; the narrator, whose vital possibilities were inseparable from the institutions and value systems of early XXI century France, glimpses a possibility of a new kind of life in the serene acceptance of his society's obsolescence and an opportune accommodation of the order that is destined to succeed it.

The conceit itself is original, and departs pleasantly from the apocalyptic invective and more or less thinly veiled racism that tends to surround the issue of Islam's growing significance in the occident. Where the book falls short is at the level of style. An essential ingredient of Houellebecq's success has always been his skill at presenting his philosophical pessimism, cobbled together from Cioran and Nietzsche and a frequently exaggerated familiarity with biology and physics, in an idiom more proper to the bestseller. Houellebecq himself is not unaware of this; in his opening letter to Bernard-Henri Levi in *Public Enemies*, he describes himself as "an unremarkable author with no style," and throughout his writings, Houellebecq has made reference to his familiarity with genre fiction. In his best work, the neutral prose tone lulls the reader, so that the cruelty of Houellebecq's vision is even more shocking; but in *Submission*, the most anodyne novel he has yet produced, it bears the marks of a listless, exhausted author content to go through the motions.

Houellebecq has adopted the old Flaubertian trick of peppering his prose with clichés, many marked off with italics. At times this is done to good effect:

"But there's the Muslim Brotherhood. They're an unknown quantity. If they got twenty percent, it would be a symbolic benchmark, and could change the balance of power..." I was talking utter bullshit, of course. Ninety-nine percent of the Muslim Brotherhood would throw their votes to the socialists. In any case, it would affect the results at all, but that phrase *balance of power* always sounds impressive in conversation, as if you'd been reading Clausewitz and Sun Tzu. I was also rather pleased with *symbolic benchmark*. In any case, Marie-Françoise nodded as if I'd just expressed an idea.

After fifty or so pages, though, the joke becomes tiresome, and the intimation creeps in that the author is not so much engaged in satire as taking shortcuts with the aid of commonplaces. The book abounds in lame adverbs like "literally" and "absolutely" and such stock descriptions as "eyes glittering with intelligence." Lest anyone be tempted to attribute the flatness of the prose to the translation, it should be noted that Lorin Stein is not only faithful to the original, but has proven his mettle with accomplished and poignant translations of Édouard Levé's *Autoportrait* and Grégoire Bouillier's *Mystery Guest*. I have also checked numerous passages of Stein's translation against the French original, and have found no hidden veins of poetic brilliance that the translator has left in obscurity.

*Submission* possesses virtues and vices of Houellebecq's other fiction, but the former have shrunken to mere vestiges, while the latter are so magnified that not even a sympathetic reader can ignore them. His wit is still there, and his sardonic antipathy for the rituals of modern life, as when he derides conversation between men as "part

buggery, part duel” or passes an afternoon “flipping back and forth between reality shows on obesity.” But the reader laughs little, and the laughter is forced, provoked less by the text in hand than by the memories it stirs up of the hilarious vitriol of earlier works like *Platform* or the essay *Jacques Prévert is a Cunt*. At the same time, Houellebecq’s refusal to portray women as something more dignified than receptacles for his protagonist’s member floats somewhere in that irritating space between offensiveness and tedium. In a sense, Houellebecq has missed an opportunity in *Submission*: the passages on YouPorn and escort websites, which could have provided context for the narrator’s terse, mechanical sexuality, instead reveal a glancing acquaintance with the subject rooted in an auctorial delusion sadly common in the age of Wikipedia: the idea that a bit of clicking around on the web can stand in for real research or sustained consideration.

A great virtue of Houellebecq’s in general has been his willingness to submit contemporary life to a larger scientific framework and to pursue the ontological questions that this procedure invites: to ask, for example, whether our civic virtues are a flimsy pretext for the more basic imperatives of evolutionary struggle, or to examine the place of love and longing in light of physical determinism. In *Submission*, unfortunately, the grounding assumptions are flawed. In Houellebecq’s view, men are agents of an unquenchable sexual desire repulsed by the sagging flesh of any woman over thirty, while women, save the young and nubile, view sex as a pretext for the acquisition of money and status and quickly tire of it once they’ve trapped the man in marriage. This flies in the face of much contemporary research into the complexity and vigor of female sexuality as well as anecdotal evidence available to anyone who converses regularly with flesh-and-blood women. Similarly, professional demographers have dismissed theses concerning the falling birthrates and the inevitable Islamization of Europe as slipshod, racist propaganda. Curiously, the plot would have rung truer had Houellebecq devoted less time to depicting the particular mechanisms of Europe’s inevitable downfall; in the absence of specifics, it is possible to suspend one’s disbelief, but when page after page proffers the same nativist boilerplate, which the reader must take seriously for the narrative to have any sense, credulity reaches a breaking point.

Not everything in the book falls so flat. It is incisive in its portrayal of academic venality and opportunism, with its gallery of repugnant professors ready to lay down their liberal principles for the money and young wives the administration has promised them, and their resolute mendacity in finding natural, even scientific reasons why they deserve these rewards, which are in fact the mere outgrowth of proximity and subservience to power. Houellebecq is also good on the idiosyncrasies of the modern gastronome, with his strange combination of mediocrity and refinement. But over two hundred plus pages, the bright spots get lost among the dreary sex scenes, indistinguishable from *Penthouse Letters*, the tiresome pastiches of tourist brochures and academic journals, and the stock prose of bestsellers, with lines like “I woke around four in the morning, lucid and alert,” or, “... Boris Cyrulnik isn’t fucking around. When it comes to psychology, no one’s got anything on him.”

It is true that the European response to Muslim immigration has ranged, in general, from apathetic to hysterical to foolish, with little serious inquiry into its long- or even midterm

consequences. For this reason, Houellebecq's novel is considered timely. But the label "timely" suggests a degree of relevance to everyday life that is hard to square with *Submission's* superficial portrayal of Europe's Muslims, let alone its incorrigible misogyny. A lack of realism would be forgivable in a book whose style showed greater refinement, originality, or delicacy. But lines like "As for blow jobs, I'd never encountered anything like them" or "the businessman looked as if he was under some serious stress" prove a torment to any but the lowest of lowbrows. In the end, Houellebecq has done a turn for an unsavory substrate that has always persisted among his admirers: solitary woman-haters, reactionaries who air their retrograde beliefs under the guise of "telling it like it is," and right-wing alarmists like Alain Finkelkraut and Theodore Dalrymple, who describes *Submission* in the *New Criterion* as a last-ditch warning to turn back to social conservatism or risk being overrun by barbarians. This is tawdry company for a writer whose early work was among the most interesting fiction to be published in the past quarter-century.