Introduction

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Introduction

Michel Houellebecq is without a doubt the most famous living French writer. Indeed, it is often suggested that no French author has achieved such global visibility since Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Not only that, but Houellebecq is commonly regarded as the single most controversial writer France has produced since Louis-Ferdinand Céline, the notoriously fascist author of *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932). Although Houellebecq’s significant literary output amounts, essentially, to just five novels, published in the space of a decade and a half, the secondary literature on the author is already considerable. There are, to date, over fifteen books in print exclusively devoted to Houellebecq, together with several extended chapters in other books and a list of scholarly articles that are rapidly becoming too numerous to count. This abundance of critical interest in Houellebecq is surely a response to three interrelated factors: Houellebecq’s almost unprecedented commercial success (at least within the field of literary fiction); his unavoidable presence in the French media; and, most importantly, his apparent ability to capture, in his writing, something of the mood of the times and to identify those areas of experience that are the site of most tension and anxiety in contemporary culture (sexuality, most notoriously, but also work, travel, and consumerism, as well as ageing, loneliness and depression).

Houellebecq typically gives his birth date as 1958, although his biographer Denis Demonpion insists, on the evidence of documents dating from before his literary celebrity, that the author was in fact born in 1956. Following a short study of the American horror writer H. P. Lovecraft (discussed below, in Chapter 3), Houellebecq began his literary career as a poet, publishing a poetic ‘method’, *Rester vivant*, in 1991, and a first collection of poems, *La Poursuite du bonheur*, in 1992. His first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* – relating the hopeless sex life of a depressed IT consultant – was published in 1994 and became
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a cult success. It was followed, in 1998, by *Les Particules élémentaires*, which confirmed his popular appeal, selling well over 500,000 copies and ultimately being translated into over thirty languages. *Plateforme* (2001) was similarly successful, and similarly controversial, for reasons we will outline below. Two further collections of poetry, *Le Sens du combat* (1996) and *Renaissance* (1999) have also appeared, and Houellebecq’s fourth novel, *La Possibilité d’une île*, was published in September 2005 following an advance marketing campaign that made it one of the most significant cultural events of the year. The novel was published simultaneously, in its various translations, in France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK. In the ensuing five years, Houellebecq published little, aside from a correspondence with Bernard-Henri Lévy (*Ennemis publics*, 2008), and directed the film adaptation of *La Possibilité d’une île*. His most recent novel, *La Carte et le territoire*, won the coveted Prix Goncourt, the most prestigious literary prize in France, in the autumn of 2010.

How, then, are we to account for Houellebecq’s extraordinary, and unrivalled, success in contemporary French literature? A frequent explanation, already intimated above, is that Houellebecq is the most precise chronicler of his generation. As Olivier Bardolle has written, Houellebecq alone ‘reflète l’époque avec la même justesse que Proust et Céline en leur temps, jusqu’à l’incarner’. Bardolle goes on to suggest that Houellebecq stands out from the rest of contemporary French writing which, following the trend for ‘autofiction’, has a tendency to be rather narcissistic, concerned principally with incestuous tales about who’s sleeping with whom, and the settling of scores within a small Parisian cultural milieu. For anyone outside this exclusive set, therefore, these works have limited interest, and they are certainly not exportable beyond French borders. *La Carte et le territoire* in part constitutes a satirical reflection on this generic tendency within French literature, as we shall see in Chapter 2. Houellebecq, by contrast, writes with what Pierre Jourde has called an ‘ambitious realism’: he is certainly not above settling personal and professional scores in print, and it is true that his books contain material that could be considered offensive, and even pornographic; but these elements take their place within a broader attempt to represent the reality of the modern world and are often focused around ‘ordinary’ people. Demonpion points out that Houellebecq engages in a detailed work of documentation in preparation for writing his novels, an approach that is not without recalling that of the great naturalist writer Émile Zola. For Bardolle, Houellebecq is such an invigorating breath of fresh air in French literature that he renders most other contemporary
French writers unreadable. But it is precisely this attitude that has angered commentators like Claire Cros, who complain at the way that Houellebecq has eclipsed the rest of French literary production to the extent that one could believe La Possibilité d’une île was the only novel published in France in the autumn of 2005. Michel Houellebecq is, as Jean-François Patricola comments, the ‘chosen one’ of contemporary French literature, and he fills that role partly because he resembles his readers: in an era of media celebrities, Houellebecq is socially awkward; at a time when only the photogenic seem to be welcome on television, Houellebecq is ‘chauve, quelconque, voire laid’; he tends to confirm the cliché according to which ‘un écrivain est toujours malheureux’, yet at the same time implies that more or less anyone could meet with unexpected fame and fortune. Houellebecq’s books are not difficult to understand, which, as Cros suggests, must come as a relief to the reading public after sixty years of being baffled by artists and intellectuals. As Bardolle notes, Houellebecq’s writing style is ‘sober, simple, factual’. This undoubtedly helps him to find readers but Patricola adds that there is enough variation of register in Houellebecq’s style for him to appeal equally to the intelligentsia (we will discuss the matter of Houellebecq’s style at length in Chapter 1). Given his impressive sales, Houellebecq must attract interest from a broad cross-section of the reading public (even if we accept that ‘the reading public’ may represent an increasingly narrow band of the overall population), and, as Viard remarks, they presumably cannot all be perverts, though we are entitled to assume that they have recognised something of their own experience in Houellebecq’s fictions. At the same time, we must not forget that Houellebecq is a very funny writer – Jourde calls him a ‘great satirist’, albeit an unusually calm and self-effacing one: ‘Une espèce de Droopy du pamphlet sociologique’. Ultimately, we must conclude with Patricola that Houellebecq’s success cannot be attributed to any one element, but to a combination of factors: ‘une rencontre entre une posture, un discours, une œuvre et un siècle’.

Houellebecq has become famous in France partly thanks to a series of controversies around his novels, which have been blown up by the French media into so many ‘affaires Houellebecq’. As this book is concerned with the study of Houellebecq’s novels, and not with his public personality, we do not intend to dwell on them at any length, or to take sides in these debates, though it would be disingenuous not to acknowledge their significance in generating the Houellebecq ‘phenomenon’. The controversy began with the publication of Les Particules élémentaires. This ambitious saga, relating the misadventures
over several decades of two brothers, Michel Djerzinski and Bruno Clément, led to Houellebecq being branded ‘reactionary’. This was partly because the novel blames the political and social movements associated with May 1968 – a period often regarded with nostalgic and idealised affection by many French people, including those who did not live through it – for much of the current malaise that Houellebecq diagnoses in French society. It was also because the novel’s proposed solution to this malaise is nothing less than genetic modification of the human species, interpreted by many commentators as a form of eugenics and therefore complicit with a fascist politics. On the basis of these views, which were to some extent confirmed as Houellebecq’s own in interviews, the author found himself dismissed from the editorial board of the left-leaning literary review *Perpendiculaire*. In retaliation, Houellebecq’s publisher Flammarion discontinued publication of the review and excluded other *Perpendiculaire* authors from its catalogue. 

Aside from its politics, however, *Les Particules électroniques* was controversial because of its tendency to refer to people and organisations by their real names. As Demonpion’s biography demonstrates, much of the narrative of *Les Particules* is loosely based on details of Houellebecq’s own life, and various characters, from family members to schoolmates, appear under their real names. A decade later, Houellebecq’s mother, who had been hurt by her cruel depiction in the novel, published her own autobiography in which she accuses Houellebecq of being an ungrateful son who has only ever been interested in other people to the extent that he can exploit them. Shortly after the publication of *Les Particules*, the proprietor of a campsite called L’Espace du possible took Houellebecq to court for making defamatory remarks about his establishment; the tribunal rejected the somewhat hyperbolic demands to ban the book and destroy all existing stocks of it, but ordered Houellebecq to change the name of the campsite featured in the novel (which became ‘Le Lieu du changement’) and Flammarion to pay damages of 5,000 francs. But this was little compared with the storm of controversy surrounding *Plateforme*, in which Houellebecq imagines a team setting up a series of holiday resorts catering openly to sex tourists, only to find their flagship Thai location targeted by Islamic terrorists. Houellebecq was again taken to court, this time by a coalition of groups representing the French Muslim community, and charged with incitement to religious hatred. He was acquitted and it is thought that the subsequent publicity did little to harm his sales figures, especially since, in the meantime, Houellebecq’s incendiary rhetoric had seemingly found empirical confirmation in the
terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, which occurred shortly after the novel’s publication. When, a year later, a terrorist bomb was detonated in a tourist nightclub in Bali, the novel’s apparent prescience was further underscored. Some commentators suggested that if Houellebecq missed out on France’s most prestigious literary prize, the Goncourt, in 2001, it was because awarding the prize to Plateforme, in the wake of 9/11, would have been interpreted as a political rather than a literary gesture. The tremendous success of both Les Particules and Plateforme made Houellebecq the most bankable figure in French literature and led to his highly publicised move from Flammarion to Fayard, who published La Possibilité d’une île after paying a reported €1.3 million for a novel that was not yet written and including a guarantee that the new publisher’s multimedia affiliates would back a film adaptation of the novel to be directed by Houellebecq himself.

But Houellebecq has not simply been controversial in spite of himself; most commentators agree that he has deliberately courted and cynically exploited this media attention. As Patricola remarks, with his use of a pseudonym, his mischievous tendency to call his protagonists Michel (in Les Particules and Plateforme), and the rather studied awkwardness of his television appearances, Houellebecq gives the impression that he is cultivating a persona. In short, as Michel Waldberg has observed, Houellebecq’s pronouncements come across as a little too strategic, a little too posed. Pierre Jourde calls Houellebecq a ‘prudent provocateur’, noting that he rails against Islam, but is wary of attacking Jews, since anti-Semitism is treated with great disdain in French cultural circles in memory of the deportations of the Second World War. In the same way, Houellebecq might cheerfully defend prostitution while being careful to disapprove of child prostitution and paedophilia. Similarly, Demonpion notes that Houellebecq is happy to be rude about the French travel books Le Guide du Routard (Routard decided against a court case but nonetheless made their displeasure known in print); but he stops short of associating his imagined sex-tourist resorts with a real multinational hospitality corporation, who would have the financial resources to mount a strenuous legal defence (Plateforme’s ‘Aurore’ is, according to Demonpion, modelled on the multinational Accor).

Inevitably, then, much early writing on Houellebecq consisted largely of discussions of these various media controversies and led to the division of Houellebecq’s commentators into two broad camps, for and against the novelist. On one hand were those authors who saw Houellebecq as a significant new voice in French literature with an important and original
vision of the contemporary world: Bardolle, Jourde and also Dominique Noguez. On the other hand there were those critics who saw in Houellebecq a charlatan and a reactionary whose literary talent was fairly limited: Cros, Demonpion, Patricola and also Éric Naulleau. In both cases, as Claire Cros recognised, criticism had a tendency to become rather limited and repetitive: Houellebecq’s enemies accused him of being a reactionary misanthropist while his defenders insisted that his books revealed a compassion for the world. For the anti-Houellebecqians, the author’s many shocking pronouncements were designed to conceal a lack of real substance or thought as well as an absence of traditional literary work in terms of the crafting of sentences or the structuring of the novels. Worse still, this apparently casual attitude, this slackness of thought and style, were presented as being laudable in themselves: Patricola accuses Houellebecq of ‘celebrating vacuity’ and ‘praising mediocrity’. Michel Waldberg agrees, lamenting Houellebecq’s ‘complaisance systématique dans le sordide, l’obsèque, le graveleux’, and arguing that his ‘realism’ becomes an excuse for inept dialogue and abject description. In this context, the advantage of Dominique Noguez’s intervention – although his book is, as Patricola recognises, effectively a hagiography – was to provide the first systematic analysis of Houellebecq’s style, showing how the impact of many of his ideas derives from the author’s careful control of register and tone (we will discuss this issue at length in Chapter 1).

This debate, then, concerns the early reception of Houellebecq’s work and part of the problem – in the context of fervid media discussion – is the lack of critical distance or perspective on the author’s work, which can only come with time and patient rereading. With this in mind, it is important to note that several of the critical works cited in this introduction (Cros, Demonpion, Naulleau, Patricola) were published in France in the autumn of 2005 to coincide with the release of La Possibilité d’une île; in other words, they were written before the authors had had a chance to read Houellebecq’s fourth novel (since, notoriously, as part of its marketing strategy, Fayard refused to provide advance reading copies of the novel to the press). (We might add, in passing, that the publication of so many books on Houellebecq in September 2005 reveals their authors to be in some ways just as cynical as Houellebecq and his publishers.) This is a crucial point because La Possibilité d’une île is Houellebecq’s longest and, perhaps still, his most ambitious novel – in many ways arguably his most successful – and must cause us to reassess with greater seriousness his overall novelistic enterprise. The addition of La Carte et le territoire in 2010 – in many ways equally
La Possibilité d’une île returns to, but expands and develops, many of the concerns of Les Particules élémentaires: its central protagonist is Daniel, a successful but ageing and sexually and emotionally unsatisfied comedian; Daniel becomes half-heartedly involved with a religious cult, the Elohimites, who promise a form of immortality achieved through human cloning. The narration of the novel is divided between Daniel and various generations of his cloned successors and, as the book progresses, it becomes clear that the promise of a cloned future has become a reality with a new species of genetically modified neo-humans coming to replace a humanity all but wiped out by war, famine and environmental catastrophe. La Carte et le territoire follows the career of Jed Martin, a visual artist working in France in the present and near future (the novel’s timeline stretches to around the middle of the twenty-first century). As part of a series of portraits, Jed meets and paints the writer Michel Houellebecq. La Carte et le territoire is thus both a self-conscious reflection on the process of artistic creation and a hilariously mocking self-portrait. But, towards the end of its narrative, the novel introduces a further unexpected element when ‘Michel Houellebecq’ is brutally murdered and La Carte et le territoire turns temporarily into a crime thriller.

These two later novels have a number of points in common: they share a complicated narrative voice split between different narrators (or focalisers in the case of La Carte et le territoire) and a carefully planned structure with complex timelines and dramatic changes in pace. Both novels engage seriously with popular literary genres: science fiction, which is far more fully integrated in La Possibilité d’une île than it was in Les Particules élémentaires, effectively giving the novel all of its significance and its unique shape; and the crime thriller or police procedural novel in La Carte et le territoire. Finally, both novels demonstrate an uncanny ability to acknowledge, or play up to, the public persona that Houellebecq has developed in the French media (the revisiting of favourite themes of sex and eugenics in La Possibilité, the ironic self-portrait in La Carte) while at the same time developing a singularly ambitious and undeniably serious discourse about the nature and direction of our human species.

In other words, Houellebecq’s work repeatedly suggests that humanity is facing a crisis, indeed perhaps that it is in terminal decline and may, in due course, have to face up to the possibility of its own extinction or its replacement by a species that is somehow more efficient, or better
Michel Houellebecq adapted to a coming post-sexual age. It is a central contention of this book that Houellebecq’s work has a significant contribution to make to debates about the ‘posthuman’ which have recently animated fields as diverse as computer science, philosophy and popular culture. The popular understanding of the posthuman stems from science-fiction narratives in which intelligent machines are shown to be capable of autonomous thought, or in which cyborgs at the interface of the human and the machine endow human beings with super- or trans-human physical capabilities. Clearly the science-fiction ‘Utopias’ of *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île* partake of such imagery with their visions of an augmented humanity that succeeds in transcending many of our contemporary social problems through genetic modification. A central tenet of the science-fictional view of the posthuman is the idea that, in the not too distant future, it may become possible to encode the contents of a human mind in digital form, store it indefinitely (including after the death of the physical body) and ultimately ‘download’ it into some new and improved carrier, whether that be a supercomputer, a cyborg or a clone of the original human being. (This fantasy is gestured at, but ultimately rejected, in *La Possibilité d’une île.*) However, as a number of cultural critics have pointed out, this notional posthumanism in the end betrays its all-too-human roots since it can be seen as simply a continuation of the ideals of Enlightenment humanism wherein humanity’s manifest destiny is self-improvement through what are regarded as ‘certain unique qualities of the human – self-awareness, consciousness and reflection, self-direction and development, the capacity for scientific and technological progress, and the valuation of rational thought’. Ironically, then, as Neil Badmington puts it, ‘the seemingly posthumanist desire to download consciousness into a gleaming digital environment is itself downloaded from the distinctly humanist matrix of Cartesian dualism’. It is this dualism – the belief in the separability of body and mind or, to put it another way, of matter and spirit – that makes possible what Jean-Marie Schaeffer has called ‘the thesis of the human exception’. For centuries, humans believed (particularly in the west, where philosophy was influenced by Christian doctrine) that humanity belonged to a different order of being than other animals because humans were blessed with certain unique qualities (variously identified as consciousness, rational thought, or godliness) that did not exist in the rest of the natural world. This thesis was first challenged by Darwinism and evolutionary biology, before being rendered increasingly untenable, in recent decades, by developments in neurophysiology, on the...
one hand, and the understanding of animal physiology and behaviour, on the other. The belief that human consciousness, intelligence and self-awareness constitute a God-given exception rather than one point among others on the evolutionary continuum now flies in the face of all accepted scientific evidence. Nonetheless, traces of this old humanism continue to inflect countless fields of discourse, including the science-fiction fantasy cited above, which implies that the uniqueness of a human mind can somehow be detached from both the physical reality of its location in a brain and body and the social reality of its learned responses and acquired culture.

There is, then, another, more rigorous interpretation of posthumanism that puts aside alarmist visions of a post-corporeal future and instead tries to accept and think through the full consequences of what Schaeffer calls the end of the human exception – the understanding that the human species is, after all, just another by-product of the long history of evolution on our planet. As Cary Wolfe puts it, this version of posthumanism ‘isn’t posthuman at all – in the sense of being “after” our embodiment has been transcended – but is only posthumanist, in the sense that it opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself’.39 Wolfe states further: ‘to me, posthumanism means not the triumphal surpassing or unmasking of something but an increase in the vigilance, responsibility, and humility that accompany living in a world so newly, and differently, inhabited’.40 To put it another way, we are obliged to re-evaluate our sense of ourselves, both as individuals and as social beings, together with our understanding of human history and our political priorities, when we grasp, with the clarity of scientific demonstration, that we are, after all, just animals, that our societies and cultures have come about through the interaction of our highly adapted bodies with our environment and that our complex minds are held in place by microscopic neurobiological processes that we are only beginning to understand. This picture is further complicated by the centrality of technology to human development. As Wolfe notes, the human is ‘fundamentally a prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically “not-human” and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is’.41 In this sense, the cyborgs of science fiction are not so much posthuman as simply a further development of the technological interface that has characterised the human from its earliest incarnations. Technology, or technics in its broadest sense, also includes human language, and, as we know from Derrida, far from being a transparent medium for the
expression of our innermost selves, language is a tool that distances us from ourselves even as it allows us to connect with others, that constitutes our subjectivity in and as difference. For Wolfe, then, where humanism conceived of humanity in terms of its active mastery and subjugation of the world, posthumanism identifies the human with ‘two kinds of passivity and vulnerability’: first, the fleshy finitude that we share with all other mortal creatures and, second, ‘the finitude we experience in our subjection to a radically ahuman technicity or mechanicity of language’, which is what allows us to conceptualise our own existence and mortality while at the same time consigning it to a distance that leaves it always a little beyond our grasp.  

The goal of this book is to employ this broader definition of the posthuman in order to interpret Houellebecq’s work, not only those narratives that appeal to the futuristic tropes of science fiction, but the whole of Houellebecq’s novelistic œuvre. Houellebecq repeatedly offers a troubling reflection on humanity by focusing on those elements of behaviour that appear most ‘animalistic’ – sex and violence – or on those forces structuring our society – the cold laws of capital – that appear indifferent to human suffering. At the same time, the narration of his novels often adopts perspectives that deliberately play down the significance of individual humans: thus we find passages of historical, sociological or economic analysis in which individual protagonists appear as little more than symptoms or representatives of wider trends. Sometimes such developments are narrated from a position situated beyond the end of the human race as we know it, thus further relativising their significance. Elsewhere, frequent comparative reference to non-human animals and the physical and social laws governing their behaviour helps to deflate human arrogance regarding our persistent, and doubtless somewhat exaggerated, belief in self-determination.  

In our first chapter, this attempt to think the inhuman and the posthuman is brought to bear on Houellebecq’s problematic discussion of sex. Many hundreds of pages have already been written about Houellebecq’s treatment of sex, but the terms of the debate – whether the sex in Houellebecq’s novels is pornographic, or at least complicit with a culture of porn; whether Houellebecq is a misogynist – tend to overlook the true import of the question. For, concealed within this discourse on sex is a sustained reflection on our species’ unstable position along a continuum that runs from the animal, through the human, to the posthuman. It is doubtless in our sexual relations that we are closest to animals and, as with all other animals, it is ultimately
through sex that our species survives. Of course, we have known at least since Freud that human sex is no longer just a question of animal instinct, but that the instinct to mate and reproduce has become harnessed to numerous complicated psychological drives which, in many cases, decouple sexuality from reproduction. This recognition, and the concomitant evolution of morality, has rightly been celebrated by many different groups – feminists, gay people, libertarians, but also numberless pragmatic realists who would claim no such affiliation. In short, this has now become the consensus in most advanced human societies. The most fundamental (and the most disturbing) challenge that Michel Houellebecq brings to this consensus might be encapsulated in the following question: if sexuality becomes irrevocably detached from the survival instinct of a species, could this not constitute a threat, precisely, to the survival of that species? Moreover, if people actually stopped having sex, because a variety of psychological and social factors made it increasingly difficult for them to find partners, or if sex became the exclusive preserve of a tiny minority in society, ‘Un jeu de spécialistes’, as Houellebecq puts it in La Poursuite du bonheur (Po, 128), are we even able to imagine the consequences? The challenge, it seems to me, is to consider such questions dispassionately, not to see in them a reactionary call for a return to family values in which sexuality could be solidly reattached to reproduction, but rather to think them through from the neutral standpoint of demographic science. Something like this struggle is going on in Houellebecq’s novels. Sometimes his descriptions of sexual misery come across as calls for change in the way we live now, a warning of the urgent need to relinquish our egocentric culture and reconnect with each other at the simple level of bodily pleasure and basic human kindness before it is too late and we lose the capacity to experience such things. This is often the perspective of Houellebecq’s protagonists. Interwoven with this, however, especially in the science-fiction frame of Les Particules élémentaires but, I would argue, also in many of the passages of detached narration in Extension du domaine de la lutte, is a perspective that takes a much broader, species-eye view of our current context and that presents the decline of humanity as an evolutionary fatality over which there is little sense in being judgemental. Houellebecq’s discourse on sex, in other words, which is at heart a discourse on humanity, fluctuates between these two positions, and it is perhaps in the end this ambivalence with regard to the human itself that makes his writing most controversial, most troubling and most vital. It is therefore only through a careful attention to Houellebecq’s style in
these early novels that the real political significance of his inflammatory
discussion of sexuality can be explored and understood.

Chapter 2 of this book analyses *Plateforme* and *La Carte et le territoire*
under the heading of ‘Work and Leisure’. The relevance of the posthuman
is perhaps less immediately obvious here since these novels are set in a
more or less identifiably realistic present and make no reference to genetic
modification, cloning and the like. What is nonetheless posthumanist
about these works, I contend, is their moral stance, and indeed it is this
stance that accounts for the controversy surrounding *Plateforme*. In his
2001 novel, Houellebecq dares to consider the vexed question of human
sexuality not from the point of view of individuals – their rights and
responsibilities, their pleasures and desires – but rather from the point
of view of *economics*, that is to say from the detached perspective of
an inhuman technics. If the novel presents an ‘apology’ for sex tourism
(and this would, anyway, be a hasty conclusion to draw), it is only as
the apparently logical outcome of an inhuman system that is otherwise
accepted as governing the development of our species whether we like
it or not. In *La Carte et le territoire*, the cold, detached gaze that
Houellebecq typically trains on the rest of humanity comes to rest on
himself. His self-portrait in this novel tends not to stress the myth of the
artistic genius, the wayward creative spirit (or, at least, suggests these
only in the derogatory mode of parody), but instead shows how the artist
is in a sense the creation of an economic process that confers artistic
value, a demonstration more fully realised in the character of Jed Martin,
the painter who is, in many ways, Houellebecq’s double in the novel.

Finally, our third chapter addresses posthuman themes and questions
most frontally. This chapter begins by outlining the radically non-anthro-
pocentric and anti-humanist conception of life developed by Houellebecq
in his earliest writings, *H. P. Lovecraft* and *Rester vivant*. It goes
on to show how Houellebecq’s posthumanist vision achieves its most
accomplished expression in *La Possibilité d’une île*, the author’s one
fully realised work of science fiction to date. Our analysis investigates
how the view of humanity’s demise in *La Possibilité* follows from the
conception of natural history developed in earlier works and asks to
what extent Houellebecq’s posthuman ‘Utopia’ bears traces of the
residual humanism that marks other fantasies of humanity’s overcoming
(in the process, it also interrogates the very notion of Utopia and its
pertinence to Houellebecq’s novel). Lastly, the legacy of humanism is
tracked in one of the most enigmatic aspects of Houellebecq’s work – his
ambiguous but unavoidable engagement with religious thinking.