CHAPTER TWO

Work and Leisure

Having devoted considerable attention to the workplace in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994), Houellebecq continued to develop a complex reflection on the place of work in our lives in his later novels *Plateforme* (2001) and *La Carte et le territoire* (2010). At the same time, however, he also pursued his interrogation of leisure and its relation to work in a capitalist economy, with particular reference to tourism. He did this most controversially in *Plateforme*, with its notorious discussion of sex tourism, and later more soberly in *La Carte et le territoire*, which also includes a self-reflexive meditation on the nature and function of art. This chapter will explore these two texts in depth.

*Plateforme*

*Plateforme*, Houellebecq’s third novel and, in many ways, his most controversial, can also be seen as a synthesis of his two preceding novels. Like *Extension du domaine de la lutte* it gives extensive, often satirical, coverage to the professional activities of white-collar office workers. Like *Extension* and *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998) it presents contemporary western society as a place where sexuality is a fraught, painful and disappointing experience for all but an elect few. And, like *Les Particules*, it conceives of a radical, utopian solution to this sexual impasse. Pierre Varrod, in an early appraisal of the novel, went further: he suggests that if *Extension* showed us the lives of those excluded from sexual relations and *Les Particules* documented a sexualised society from which all possibility of love had disappeared, the redemptive narrative of *Plateforme* unites sex and love in the narrator Michel’s tender but very torrid relationship with Valérie. As such, Varrod concludes, *Plateforme* can be considered the novel of Houellebecq’s maturity.¹ In this chapter, I
have chosen not to address this relationship at any length, partly because,
as Varrod and other commentators have recognised, the character of
Valérie comes across more as a fantasy figure than as a flesh-and-blood
woman. She is beautiful, intelligent and successful, invariably gentle and
understanding, but also, in the words of David Lehardy Sweet, ‘a sexual
dynamo whose primary goal in life seems to be to get Michel off’.

I have argued elsewhere that Michel’s relationship with Valérie reads so much
like a pornographic fantasy that it is sometimes tempting to dismiss the
entire middle section of the novel as a kind of extended dream sequence
concocted by Houellebecq’s otherwise hapless and lonely narrator.
Instead of this central relationship, then, this section will concentrate on
those aspects of Plateforme that made it so controversial: the proposal
for a generalised sex tourism as a logical economic response to the
current sexual malaise; and the provocative comments about race and
religion that accompany Houellebecq’s touristic narrative.

Economics
At one point in Plateforme, the narrator Michel relates his ongoing
experiment to test the hypothesis that one can gain an adequate sense of
the historical movement of the world by reading nothing but the business
and economy sections of the newspaper. With typical Houellebecqian
irony, Michel mutters that the only definite conclusion he has so far
reached is that ‘l’économie était effroyablement ennuyeuse’ (‘economics
was unspeakably boring’ (P, 271; 281)). But the point is made: Plateforme
is a novel determinedly grounded in economic realities and, as Pierre
Varrod remarks, the sheer amount of detail accorded here to company
life and professional trajectories is without precedent in the contem-
porary French novel. More than ever, people in Plateforme are defined
by their professional role and status. Michel describes a colleague
named Cécilia in his office as ‘une CDD, voire une TUC, quelqu’un en
résumé d’assez négligeable’ (P, 22; 16). As in Extension du domaine de
la lutte, if the narrator himself finds it difficult to fulfil a professional
role without being assailed by a sense of absurdity, he nonetheless dimly
acknowledges that such a role played with confidence and conviction
can assert a powerful erotic appeal. He is aroused when Valérie dresses
in a tight-fitting suit for a business meeting, what she calls her ‘tenue
de séductrice institutionnelle’ (‘corporate seductress outfit’ (P, 266;
276)). But a similar professional magnetism is exerted by men, as when
Michel is seized by ‘une sympathie irraisonnée, anormale’ for a police
captain who takes his statement following the murder of his father
The novel also contains warm, if rather baffled, portraits of a bank manager \(P\), various company directors, including the German Gottfried Rembke, the very model of a business executive: ‘On l’imaginait sauter dans sa journée avec enthousiasme, se lever du lit d’un bond et faire une demi-heure de vélo d’appartement avant de se diriger vers son bureau dans sa Mercedes flambant neuve en écoutant les informations économiques’ \(P\). \(^7\) Valérie’s boss, Jean-Yves, is similarly the object of Michel’s puzzled admiration – his tremendous success cannot be explained away by the desire for wealth: ‘Son ambition, existant par elle-même, ne pouvait être ramenée à aucune autre cause […] En réalité, Jean-Yves travaillait parce qu’il avait le goût du travail; c’était à la fois mystérieux et limpide’ \(P\). \(^8\)

But Plateforme not only indulges in this somewhat mystificatory (or at least mystified) fetishisation of professional status; the novel is also careful to quantify it in measurable terms. Michel, for instance, inherits from his dead father ‘ce qu’un ouvrier non qualifié pouvait espérer gagner, en Europe occidentale, au cours d’une vie de labeur’ \(P\). \(^9\) We are told that Valérie earns 40,000 francs per month but that, bearing in mind her 40 per cent tax contribution and her monthly rent of 10,000 francs, this works out to less than it initially appears \(P\). \(^1\) Plateforme may only indulge in this somewhat mystificatory (or at least mystified) fetishisation of professional status; the novel is also careful to quantify it in measurable terms. Michel, for instance, inherits from his dead father ‘ce qu’un ouvrier non qualifié pouvait espérer gagner, en Europe occidentale, au cours d’une vie de labeur’ \(P\). \(^2\)

The narrator notes, in American popular fiction, an obsession with long working hours as a badge of elite status: characters in John Grisham’s The Firm work eighty to ninety hours per week, and in David Baldacci’s Total Control ninety to 110 hours \(P\). \(^3\) Later we are told that Jean-Yves himself works twelve to fourteen hours per day \(P\). \(^4\) If fulfilling sexual relationships have become next to impossible in the west, then, it is partly because no one has any time. Plateforme may recognise global corporate capitalism as the natural milieu in which its narrative evolves, and it may display apparently genuine wonder for some of capitalism’s success stories, but ultimately the novel leans towards critique. It is not enough to succeed in business, as Valérie tells Michel, because the pressure to innovate, grow and improve is unrelenting: ‘c’est le principe du capitalisme: si tu n’avances pas, tu es mort’ \(P\). \(^5\) The characters are trapped in this system, not only by their economic dependency, but because the insane cadence of their working life forestalls any attempt to think through an alternative. As Valérie says, ‘je ne vois pas comment y échapper. Il faudrait, une fois, qu’on prenne le temps de réfléchir; mais je ne sais pas quand on pourra prendre le temps de réfléchir’ \(P\). \(^6\) The only conceivable solution to this impasse is provided by the ultimate dream of capitalism: to make
so much money that one can withdraw from active life altogether. This is the future that Michel and Valérie begin to envisage at the end of *Plateforme*: having achieved unparalleled success with their chain of sex tourism resorts, they consider retiring to Thailand on the proceeds, breaking out of the infernal cycle of capitalism where one is encouraged to work harder in order to consume more, which in turn encourages more production necessitating more consumption and thus harder work. Or, as Valérie succinctly puts it, ‘La seule chose que puisse t’offrir le monde occidental, c’est des *produits de marque*’ (*P*, 317; 328).^{12}

There is, then, a degree of overlap between certain economic conclusions of *Plateforme* and the ideas and rhetoric of current anti-capitalist movements, what are sometimes called in French ‘altermondialistes’.^{13} But, as Varrod remarks,^{14} Houellebecq is no militant himself, nor is he even really an active sympathiser with the anti-capitalist cause. The realities of capitalism, though they may provoke disappointment, fatigue and even anger in Houellebecq’s novels, are, more often than not, greeted with resignation. Benjamin Verpoort, discussing *Lanzarote* (2000), suggests that Houellebecq has invented a new type of fictional character that Verpoort dubs the *loser*: ‘une sorte de figure picaresque traversant un univers capitaliste qui le contrôle à part entière et qui détermine sa conduite’.^{15} The use of the American term ‘loser’ is close to David Sweet’s characterisation of *Plateforme*’s hero as a ‘slacker’,^{16} but this designation is surely anachronistic. The slacker is particularly associated with so-called ‘Generation X’, born in the ‘baby-bust’ years of the mid-1970s. Generation X came of age in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the collapse of communism and vastly increased influence of global corporations seemed to imply an end to all realistic possibility of ideological struggle. The only available stance thus became a half-hearted participation in economic activity and an ironic cultural consumption that was inevitably complicit with capitalism but at least self-aware (hence ‘slacker’). Houellebecq and his protagonists have a rather different relation to the recent history of capitalism and its adversaries (Michel in *Plateforme* is around forty at the turn of the millennium, putting his birth date close to Houellebecq’s own stated birth date of 1958): their own disappointment stems from the way in which the liberatory promise of the countercultural movements of the late sixties and seventies were subsumed, or indeed transformed, into the aggressive entrepreneurial capitalism of the eighties and nineties. This is a peculiarly French sense of dissatisfaction with the current state of the market economy but need not imply an ideological opposition to
capitalism per se. Indeed, in *Ennemis publics* (2008), Houellebecq writes disarmingly of his nostalgia for the ‘Trente Glorieuses’, the thirty years of growth, prosperity and optimism that France enjoyed in the decades following the Second World War. The energy and *joie de vivre* of these years, Houellebecq suggests, now seem more impossibly distant than even the 1930s or the 1890s and, when looking at pictures from these years, ‘je comprends que ce n’est pas seulement moi qui suis dépressi

Significantly, though, in *Plateforme*, the proposed solution to the social and sexual quagmire in which the west is stuck comes from capitalism itself. In *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île* (2005), Houellebecq’s response to socio-sexual misery is to imagine a future community in which, although it may not be explicitly stated as such, a market economy presumably has little or no place. In *Plateforme*, on the contrary, a more short-term solution is found within the eminently capitalist domain of tourism. In a pioneering study, Dean MacCannell argued that the rise of mass tourism coincides with a transition to a post-industrial economy in which ‘occupations’ no longer provide the basis for social status, social action and social relationships and are instead replaced by ‘lifestyle’. In this post-industrial context, work is pushed to ‘the negative margins of existence’ and is replaced by the conviction that ‘life itself is supposed to be fun’. This is the world described by Houellebecq, in which the injunction to enjoy ourselves (which, like the injunction to make money, proves in practice to be much less egalitarian than it may sound, since the conditions of access to enjoyment are inequitably divided) coincides with the total collapse of productive labour. As Michel muses in *Plateforme*, ‘aucune personne que je connaisse, n’aurait été capable, en cas par exemple de blocus par une puissance étrangère, d’assurer un redémarrage de la production industrielle […] Nous vivions dans un monde composé d’objets dont la fabrication, les conditions de possibilité, le mode d’être nous étaient absolument étrangers’ (*P*, 217; 225). Michel is completely unable to understand Valérie’s bikini (made of 80 per cent latex and 20 per cent polyurethane) so instead slips a finger inside to caress her nipple. The order of the narration here serves as a demonstration of Houellebecq’s point: since we are irredeemably alienated from thinking a latex bikini as a product of labour, all we can do is appreciate its superficial texture and use it for the purpose for which it was designed: a symbolic prop promoting an eroticised culture of fun. Where work is to be found at all in this culture, suggests MacCannell, it exists as an object of *sightseeing,*
located in museums and heritage centres, or alternatively found in other, less developed cultures which can be consumed through tourism. If westerners are still able to appreciate the dignity and universality of labour, argues MacCannell, it is not through their own work, from which they are thoroughly alienated, but instead ‘as it is revealed to them at their leisure through the displayed work of others’.20 (This notion of work as something that we no longer know how to relate to in the west – at least not in a healthy manner – will be discussed further in relation to La Carte et le territoire below.)

Tourism
Paradoxically, then, Plateforme depicts a society in which we are working more than ever yet producing nothing of substance. If tourism becomes a central figure in Houellebecq’s writing – not just in Plateforme but also in Lanzarote – it is because of its ability to symbolise this contradictory situation. Houellebecq claims, without clear evidence, that tourism became, in the year 2000, ‘la première activité économique mondiale’ (‘the biggest economic activity in the world’ (P, 33; 29)). In a country such as France, traditional occupations like agriculture cannot compete with the revenue to be made from tourism (as Valérie’s parents discover (P, 58; 54–5)). Meanwhile, in a developing nation such as Cuba, everyone is dependent upon secondary activities related to tourism in order to supplement their insufficient income (P, 216–17; 224). For those in the west, it seems, the simplest way to alleviate the suffering associated with alienated labour and unfulfilled sexuality is to go somewhere else. As Houellebecq writes, ‘Dès qu’ils ont quelques jours de liberté les habitants d’Europe occidentale se précipitent à l’autre bout du monde […] ils se comportent littéralement comme des évadés de prison’ (P, 31; 27).21 Indeed, in Houellebecq’s bleak assessment, which tallies with Valérie’s conclusion at the end of Plateforme, the west can no longer be considered a place to live but only a place in which to make money in order to be able to afford to live elsewhere (I2, 199). Houellebecq observes this same trend in his short article entitled ‘L’Allemand’ (‘The German’). Germans today, Houellebecq suggests, treat their homeland as a functional, reliable, but rather dull place in which to make money. As soon as they have made enough, they retire to a place with better weather, where they will have begun to put down roots over a series of vacations. In this sense, Germans regard their own nation in much the same way as economic migrants such as Turks: not as a home but merely a temporary base in which to accumulate capital (I2, 97–100). Tourism,
then, offers those with money a chance to reconnoitre their probable retirement home, while providing an elusive dream of alternative lifestyles for those without the capital to realise their definitive relocation. In purveying this fantasy of another life, the tourist industry lays bare the latent ambition of all consumer capitalism: the quantification of happiness. As Houellebecq remarks, there is sometimes even a helpful star-rating system, ‘pour indiquer l’intensité du bonheur qu’on [est] en droit d’espérer’ (‘which indicate[s] the intensity of the pleasure one [is] entitled to hope for’ (P, 20; 14)).

What kind of tourism does Houellebecq describe? As Aedín Ní Loingsigh has pointed out, the originality of Plateforme, when compared to the well-established genre of travel writing, is to offer not an independent discovery of the ‘real’ Thailand but instead that most vilified product of mass tourism: the package tour. At the beginning of the novel, Michel is honest about his ambitions: he does not exactly want to travel so much as engage in tourism. ‘Mes rêves,’ he admits, ‘sont médiocres’ (‘My dreams are run-of-the-mill’ (P, 31; 27)). As Maud Granger Remy notes, travel, in Plateforme, is a consumer product like any other; the exotic, just like sex, is shown to have a precise monetary value. In keeping with the mixture of genres and registers described in Chapter 1 above, Plateforme often reads a little like a sales brochure. Both here and in Lanzarote, Houellebecq describes holiday packages in considerable detail, citing not just their duration and price, but also the official title, catalogue reference number and choice excerpts from the promotional literature (P, 31–2; 28; L, 11; 5). Lengthy discussion is also provided of tourism companies, their history, size, market share and commercial strategy (P, 32–3, 148–9; 29–30, 151–3). And, as an obedient consumer, Michel is pleased to detail the brand names, price, provenance and specifications of his new tourist accessories, a backpack and video camera (P, 37–8; 34).

As part of his coverage of mass tourism, Houellebecq does not hesitate to employ stereotypes. Michel himself, considering the uneasy clash between his ‘bureaucratic’ face and his casual beachwear, realises that he himself has become a stereotype: ‘un fonctionnaire quadragénaire qui tentait de se déguiser en jeune pour la durée de ses vacances’ (P, 43; 39). As elsewhere in Houellebecq, much sexual stereotyping inevitably takes place. Thus, two young single women on Michel’s package tour are immediately judged to be ‘bimbos’ (P, 39; 35); meanwhile, a middle-aged, middle-class couple ‘donnaient l’impression de n’avoir pas baisé depuis trente ans’ (‘looked like they hadn’t fucked for thirty years’ (P, 46; 41)).
The overall profile and behaviour of the group is just as predictable as that of the individuals, and some of the finest moments of observational comedy in *Plateforme* come in Houellebecq’s almost ethnographically styled reportage on the herding instincts of package tourists. As the tour gets under way, Michel anticipates that the group will soon be divided between two tables at meal times: ‘il était temps de choisir son camp’ (‘it was time to take sides’ (*P*, 53; 49)). The first instinct is for all the couples to gravitate towards each other, ‘comme dans toute situation d’urgence’ (*P*, 66; 65). Later, though, the tables divide along lines of class and education (*P*, 71–2; 67–8) with the group at the ‘lower’ table muttering darkly about the pretentious ‘poseurs’ across the room (*P*, 103; 103). This thoroughly predictable behaviour is, however, entirely in keeping with the reassuringly familiar nature of the package tour which is designed to provide a comfortable dose of the exotic, an expected degree of the unexpected. As Michel realises while ticking all the ‘Good’ boxes on his customer-satisfaction questionnaire, ‘Mes vacances s’étaient déroulées de façon normale. Le circuit avait été cool, mais avec un parfum d’aventure; il correspondait à son descriptif’ (*P*, 128; 130). Aedín Ní Loingsigh points out that since Houellebecq’s characters are deliberately rendered so predictable ‘we are numbed like tourists into expecting the expected, and even the unexpected’.

Thus, when the dinner-table conversations become the occasion for controversial remarks about race, religion and sex tourism (as we will see below), the relative shock is minimised. But Dean MacCannell goes further in assessing the cultural role of package tourists’ predictable responses: the expected reactions of awe and admiration before sacred sites and great monuments, combined with a sense of disgust or indignation at the spectacle of poverty and pollution witnessed on holiday serve a wider function of social cohesion: ‘Together, the two provide a moral stability to the modern touristic consciousness that extends beyond immediate social relationships to the structure and organization of the total society.’

One of the clichés of the tourist imaginary so precisely satirised by Houellebecq is the assumed superiority of ‘authentic’ culture where the authentic is opposed to the touristic, and to the tourist’s own culture (as MacCannell notes, ‘for moderns, reality and authenticity are thought to be elsewhere’). As a result, MacCannell specifies further, ‘Tourists dislike tourists’, considering them (selves) to be representatives of the inauthentic. Josiane, one of the members of Michel’s package tour, is a good example of the tourist’s displaced self-loathing: ‘Ce qu’elle pensait des touristes français qui ne pouvaient pas voyager..."
sans leur pinard, il ne fallait pas le lui demander’ (P, 73; 70). A similar attitude is displayed by the quintessentially French guidebook, the *Guide du Routard*. The *Routard* is contemptuous of the very tourists who constitute its customer base and readership, written by ‘des grincheux, dont l’unique objectif était de gâcher jusqu’à la dernière petite joie des touristes, qu’ils haïssaient’ (P, 54; 51). Guide books like this of course favour ‘authentic’ destinations that are somewhat off the beaten track, but as such their stance is hypocritical since, as David Sweet notes, ‘they set in motion the very processes that popularize and over-develop the alternative destinations they advertise’. Michel eventually tosses his *Guide du Routard* in the bin. Tourist discourse, then, is divided into what MacCannell calls front and back regions: on the one hand, sites set up specifically to cater to tourists; on the other, ‘authentic’ locations consistent with the lived reality of the indigenous population. But, says MacCannell, ‘It is always possible that what is taken to be entry into a back region is really entry into a front region that has been totally set up in advance for touristic visitation’. This is what happens when Michel’s tour arrives at a ‘primitive’ jungle resort, which appears to offer a taste of unspoilt Thailand, but has in fact been created by an expatriate Frenchman and serves traditional gallic cuisine. Houellebecq’s ironic narration takes particular delight in the fact that a couple of tourists who are invariably described as ‘les écologistes jurassiens’ (‘the ecologists from the Jura’) spend a sleepless night tormented by mosquitoes in this eco-tourist paradise (P, 79–80; 76–7).

The authentic, in other words, is unmasked in *Plateforme* as a desultory illusion sustained by tourists whose superior knowledge of the local culture is the ironic cover for their own, more fundamental naivety. Again it is an exchange with Josiane that underlines Houellebecq’s point. Both she and Michel avoid the demonstration of traditional Thai dancing that accompanies a dinner on their tour, Michel because he is busy getting a ‘full body massage’, but Josiane because she finds it ‘un peu trop touristique’ (‘a bit touristy’). Michel appears baffled by this comment: ‘Qu’est-ce qu’elle voulait dire par là? Tout est touristique. Je me retins une fois de plus de lui foutre mon poing sur la gueule’ (P, 52; 48). The comically excessive violence with which Michel greets Josiane’s remark perhaps plays down the real importance of his judgement that ‘Tout est touristique’, which condenses the central thesis of *Plateforme*. What Houellebecq’s novel shows, to quote Ní Loingsigh’s gloss of this remark, is that ‘the “base” commodity values of tourism have become integral to all areas of modern life’. If tourism is the
very model of capitalist activity, quantifying, packaging and selling the world itself as so many fun experiences, then the ‘hedonistic consumers’ that are tourists become, as Ryan Bishop and Lilian Robinson have argued, ‘universal cultural ambassadors, espousing as they do the value of the global marketplace and the globe-as-marketplace’. Tourists are universal ambassadors because tourism has become – or at least provides the model for – a universal morality. Maud Granger Remy, following Christopher Lasch, has identified this ‘touristic approach to morality’, which consists of respecting other people, cultures and lifestyles, but, in its undiscriminating acceptance, has forgotten that respect is something to be earned rather than automatically accorded. The culture of mass tourism has turned us all into onlookers. As MacCannell comments, tourism is symptomatic, but also generative, of a wider culture in which people are ‘permitted to view details of the inner operation of a commercial, domestic, industrial or public institution’: one can go and view anything from a working farm or a nuclear power station to a parliament building and a royal palace. This culture of managed transparency has evident parallels with the increasingly visible sexuality that Houellebecq evoked in *Les Particules élémentaires*, which is why the touristic considerations of *Plateforme* provide a natural sequel. MacCannell himself, writing in the 1970s when the culture of ‘liberated’ sexuality and mass pornography first came to prominence, draws the same comparison: ‘Some political radicals and conservatives consider “swinging”, “massage therapy” and “wide-screen cunnilingus” to be indices of a general relaxation of society’s moral standards. These are, however, only special cases of reality displays, public orgasm worked up in the interest of social solidarity’.

*Sex tourism*

Given these parallels between the development of mass tourism and the rise of the sex industry as key markers of the culture of fun, it is understandable that the combination of the two in international sex tourism becomes the principal subject of *Plateforme*. Like sex, other cultures and peoples are more visibly present in our lives than ever before: sex tourism, then, constitutes a ‘natural’ combination of the two. Chris Ryan and Michael Hall have in fact argued that sex tourism could be seen as little more than a gradation or logical extension of tourism generally, since holidays, like so much else in consumer capitalism (cars, clothes, soft drinks), are sold through the illusory promise of sexual imagery: ‘it is the female body that is used to represent the pleasure of
the beach holiday'. Might we, then, extend the fundamental insight of Dean MacCannell? If the western tourist, thoroughly alienated from meaningful labour, seeks out work as a sight to see while on holiday, could the same become true of sex? If, as Houellebecq argues throughout his work, a happy, healthy sexuality has become virtually impossible in the west, is the next step for westerners to go and first observe it and subsequently purchase and practise it elsewhere? Thus, what MacCannell calls the generalised ‘spuriousness’ of western culture (read: sexuality) would find its idealised respondent in another society (and sexuality) fantasised as being more ‘genuine’. Bishop and Robinson concur that a sexual subjectivity must be thoroughly alienated if it is to ‘naturalize the purchase of sex on a regular basis and an entire international industry to support it’. For Houellebecq, however, or at least for Houellebecq’s narrator in Plateforme, sex tourism results from a simple, and inevitable, economic logic. The passage in which this logic is laid out has doubtless become the most (in)famous of the entire novel:

In Plateforme, this is presented as a win-win situation: a Thai sex worker can make in one night what an unskilled labourer in the same economy would make in a month; meanwhile, Valérie and Jean-Yves’s tourism company, prepared to exploit this market openly with specifically targeted holiday resorts, is faced with a 50 per cent increase in profits. But, as Bishop and Robinson remark, in their impassioned and invaluable study of the Thai sex industry, such a view ‘fosters a myth of worker and client reciprocity meeting each other’s needs in an economic universe where capitalist relations are constructed as a part of nature’.

But, before we give serious consideration to criticisms of Houellebecq’s idea, we must bear in mind that this vision of a generalised sex tourism takes its place alongside his other utopian solutions to our culture’s sexual stalemate. The only difference – which perhaps explains the added controversy around Plateforme – is that this ‘solution’ could conceivably be put in place tomorrow, rather than in some distant, genetically
modified future. In this sense, as Granger Remy suggests, tourism is already a ‘posthumanism’ in so far as it establishes the conditions of possibility for a profound modification of the human.47 Granger Remy argues that the tourists of Plateforme anticipate the neo-humans of La Possibilité d’une île, isolated in their secure retreats on a territory that remains foreign to them, and to whose inhabitants they feel a natural sense of superiority or at least an ethical disaffiliation. In other words, just as Les Particules élémentaires and La Possibilité d’une île imagine humanity engineering its own posthuman successor, Plateforme’s posthumanist vision of an international sexual economy could be taken to represent the next evolutionary step for human sexuality,48 or at the very least an evolution of the free market economy, whose inhuman logic is here pushed to its extremes.49 If we accept that human beliefs, attitudes and behaviours are susceptible to a process of natural selection along the same broad lines as animal physiology (and the grand historical sweep of Houellebecq’s novels, especially Les Particules élémentaires, seems to presuppose such an acceptance), then the implication of Plateforme is that our ingrained disgust and indignation at the very idea of sex tourism may gradually fade, and then die out altogether, under the imperious influence of needs that cannot be otherwise met by the market economy: the need for sex in the west, the need for cash in the developing world. In this way, over the coming decades, prostitution may become as widely accepted a part of mainstream popular culture as pornography has become over the past thirty-five years with the unfettered development of deregulated and uncensored audiovisual media.50 As with his other prophecies (the collapse of voluntary human sexuality in Les Particules; mass self-imposed euthanasia in La Possibilité d’une île), Houellebecq makes the proposed scenario seem inevitable by exaggerating the numbers of people already affected and ignoring those social groups who would disprove his theory: contented monogamous couples; happy, healthy senior citizens; opponents of sex tourism. Michel in Plateforme estimates the potential client base for his utopian sexual economy as 80 per cent of western adults, both men and women (P, 237; 245). As he sits in an open-air restaurant in Patong Beach watching a group of what may be young Californian or Australian men (either way shorthand for the most ‘evolved’ societies on the planet), each accompanied by a Thai prostitute, he concludes that ‘le tourisme sexuel était l’avenir du monde’ (‘sex tourism would be […] the future of the world’ (P, 107; 107)).

The implication, of course, is that if sex tourism partakes of an evolutionary logic then there is no point objecting to it, any more
than it is worth objecting to the extinction of the dodo, or the advent of the internet: these phenomena are the result of naturally occurring historical factors that are beyond any individual’s control. If *Plateforme* created such scandal, then, it is partly because Houellebecq describes sex tourism without apparent judgement, simply as an economic reality. Houellebecq himself has suggested, surely somewhat disingenuously, that the focus of the press on the issue of sex tourism overlooks what is really shocking about *Plateforme*’s diagnosis: the extinction of the conditions of possibility for love in the west which renders sex tourism a structural necessity (I2, 198). Inevitably, though, the novel’s discussion of prostitution has given rise to criticism. David Lehardy Sweet accuses Houellebecq of being complicit with the consumer culture’s ‘ethic of fun’ that elsewhere he presumes to criticise.\(^5^1\) (In fact, however, Houellebecq seems to be satirising this culture, and in particular its degradation of the concept of rights, in the advertising slogan adopted by Eldorador Aphrodite, the chain of sex tourism-supporting resorts: ‘parce qu’on a le droit de se faire plaisir’ ['because pleasure is a right’ (*P*, 248; 256)].) But the harshest criticism of *Plateforme* must be reserved for Houellebecq’s unquestionably rose-tinted treatment of prostitution. All of the sex workers encountered in the novel, and especially in the scenes set in Thailand, are beautiful, attentive and talented, ‘les meilleures amantes du monde’ (‘the best lovers in the world’ (*P*, 77; 74)). Not only that but, in keeping with the utopian spirit of the enterprise, they all seem to be enjoying themselves, eager to fuck and sometimes reaching their own orgasms (*P*, 117; 118). AIDS, which, according to some estimates, could be responsible for as many as one-third of all deaths in Thailand,\(^5^2\) is largely absent from this picture, the narrator not hesitating to trust a prostitute who declares ‘No problem, no condom … I’m OK!’ (*P*, 116; 117). In short, as Michel exclaims, ‘C’était une bénédiction, ces petites salopes’ (‘They were a godsend, these little Thai whores’ (*P*, 303; 315)). And it is not just Thai prostitutes who are eager to provide the narrator’s happiness: even indigenous locals not employed by the sex industry, such as a Cuban chambermaid, join in unquestioningly with the western couple’s sexual congress at the mere tendering of a hand in invitation (*P*, 206; 212). Pierre Varrod’s assessment of this material can stand for that of many other critics when he writes: ‘le silence sur la prostitution forcée est assourdissant’ (‘the silence over enforced prostitution is deafening’).\(^5^3\)

But is it really fair to judge *Plateforme* in these terms? Varrod protests that Houellebecq fails to show the extent to which prostitution
is ‘forced’; but, we might respond, in Houellebecq’s novelistic universe, *everything is forced*. Houellebecq has repeatedly implied, both in his novels and in interviews, that such reassuring notions as individual psychology and freedom of choice are fictions created by and used to sustain the market economy. Houellebecq subscribes to Auguste Comte’s view that ‘psychology’ should be considered as little more than a branch of animal physiology (*I*, 247–8). Meanwhile, the notion of ‘free will’ is essentially nothing but a self-congratulatory ‘decoration’ resulting from the fact that people are conscious of their desires but not conscious of the causes of those desires (*EP*, 175; 170). In Houellebecq’s terms, then, it would be a truism to suggest that prostitution is ‘forced’ because, even when it is not enforced by threatened or actual violence, women are still pushed into the role by their economic circumstances, themselves largely an accident of birth. As Bishop and Robinson comment, in the vast majority of cases, prostitution is, at best, ‘a forced choice’ or, in the words of Ryan and Hall, ‘the least of numerous evils’. In short, Houellebecq’s novel implies the following conclusion: all prostitution is ‘forced’ to the extent that even those women who may choose sex work as a quick, efficient and relatively enjoyable way of making money would doubtless not choose to sleep with all these men if they could easily make as much money doing something else; similarly, all men who pay for sex are ‘forced’ to do so to the extent that if they could gratify their sexual urges free of charge through the willing connivance of women, they would not consider paying a prostitute. Admittedly, as Bishop and Robinson protest, it is an ‘oversimplification’ to equate ‘those who suffer from lonely privilege’ with ‘those who suffer from crushing poverty’: ‘One is seeking sexual succor; the other is seeking mere subsistence’. Nonetheless, we might argue, ultimately, that Houellebecq’s point is not so dissimilar from that of scholars such as Bishop and Robinson. In their different ways, both try to show that by focusing on the stereotype of the sordid and immoral sex tourist, or on ‘the problem’ of child prostitution, we overlook the broader structural-economic factors that make sex tourism possible, that is to say the economic disparities between the first world and the developing world and, within a country like Thailand, between the urban, touristic economy and the rural, agricultural economy. In the absence of a more radical solution to these inequities, both Houellebecq and most ethnographic observers of sex work are calling, first and foremost, for a normalisation and regularisation of the market and of working practices. Houellebecq’s vision of a chain of resorts called Eldorador
Aphrodite aims at precisely that, albeit couched in rather more flippant and self-serving terms.

But, of course, it is precisely these terms that are the problem. A charitable (though doubtless rather naive) reading of Plateforme might suggest that it presents a realistic, if imperfect, solution to real social and economic problems. But this would be to overlook the fact that the very idea of a mass regulated sex tourism revives a colonialisit relationship between the west and the developing world. This relationship is necessarily hypocritical since, in seeking solace from the failure of western sexuality amid the ‘unspoiled’ sexuality of developing nations, the sex tourist is all the time importing his own bankrupt values into the local culture. Needless to say, there is nothing ‘natural’ about the submissiveness of Thai women which, leaving aside domestic cultural traditions, is partly the result of the exertion, in the recent past, of the west’s economic and military power. Pattaya, the beach resort where Houellebecq’s novel closes, was originally set up based on a contractual agreement by the Thai government to provide ‘rest and recreation’ facilities to American GIs during the Vietnam War. When, in the 1970s, Thailand sought to develop its tourist economy following encouragement from the World Bank, the brothels set up to cater for US troops could easily be turned into hostess bars serving the unaccompanied business travellers who represented the first wave of international visitors to the kingdom. Thus, as Bishop and Robinson put it, ‘corporate entertainment contracts [...] effectively replaced military ones’, and Thailand’s reputation as the world’s pre-eminent destination for sex tourism was established. ‘Without a large set of clients,’ insist Bishop and Robinson, ‘the international sex industry could not flourish’. The terms of the encounter are always set, in the last instance, by the westerner, who wields the economic power. As Michel notes in Plateforme, ‘le prix de base, c’est à peu près toujours le même: celui que les Occidentaux sont prêts à payer’ (P, 207; 214).

Michel is no doubt engaging in a form of knowing postmodern irony when he suggests that the Eldorado Aphrodite resorts might borrow a line from Baudelaire to use in their marketing: ‘Et des esclaves nus tout imprégnés d’odeurs...’ (P, 246; 254). In places, nonetheless, the Thai sex industry is disturbingly reminiscent of the slave trade, the girls lined up to be selected for purchase by white men, who identify the one they want thanks to a number pinned to her chest (P, 113; 114). The attitude Michel takes towards his chosen bar girl is typical of the paternalistic coloniser – ‘Je passai une main sous sa jupe et lui caressait les fesses, comme pour
la protéger’ (P, 114; 115) — whereas the indigenous women appear, to borrow Bishop and Robinson’s analysis, ‘simultaneously childlike and erotic’, according to ‘tropes that have been part of colonial discourse for centuries’. Furthermore, the kind of tourism envisaged under the name Eldorador Aphrodite — self-contained resorts run by a western-based multinational company but tolerating, and indeed encouraging, local prostitutes to operate within their grounds — differs little from what Dean MacCannell, citing the work of Ruth Young, calls ‘plantation tourism’. Frequently found in ‘societies with rigid, dualized class systems and already exploited peasant masses’, this kind of set-up can be regarded as doubly exploitative in that ‘the tourist gets little for his money’, and the westerner’s money does nothing to boost the wider economy, in this case serving only to sustain the demand for a steady supply of prostitutes.

It would perhaps be wrong to overstate the similarities between the traditional colonial relationship and that envisaged by Houellebecq in Plateforme — after all, the economic and geopolitical contexts are very different today than they were two or three centuries ago. All the same, it must be regarded as a neo-colonialist attitude if western males seek compensation for what is, arguably today, the declining influence of white European culture through the exertion of power over the bodies of women in the developing world. Or, as Robert, a self-confessed racist on Michel’s package tour puts it, ‘Le véritable enjeu de la lutte raciale […] c’est la compétition pour le vagin des jeunes femmes’ (P, 114; 114).

‘Race’

Part of the controversy around Plateforme, then, evidently stems from Houellebecq’s apparent insensitivity to issues of race and ethnicity. There are, I suggest, three strands to the ‘ethnic’ controversy of Plateforme that need to be disentangled. These are effectively three separate issues, linked only by the very broad overall sense of a social malaise that permeates all of Houellebecq’s writing; each represents a ‘problem’ that is, to all intents and purposes, largely unrelated to the others. It is their proximity in the text, however, that creates an impression of cross-influence and can lead to hasty accusations — for instance, to Houellebecq being branded ‘racist’. The first ‘issue’ is that of sex tourism, with its inevitable neocolonialist implications, discussed above. The second is the question of ‘ethnic’ violence in France, in particular located in the deprived banlieues and associated with young men of immigrant heritage. The headquarters of Valérie’s company, Aurore, are located in the Parisian suburb of Evry, an area with the highest crime
rate in France and site of frequent violent clashes between police and disenfranchised local youths. The Aurore offices are situated in a secure compound and employees are discouraged from using public transport. When one young woman makes the mistake of catching the train home late at night, she is brutally gang raped (P, 191–2; 197). The third ethnic controversy in Plateforme is the anti-islamic discourse voiced in the novel. As the narration progresses, this discourse becomes generalised and is spread among various characters (as we will see below) but, initially at least, the hatred of Islam is closely focalised on Michel. The novel opens with Michel’s discovery that his father has been murdered by a Muslim, the brother of the maid with whom Michel’s father was having an affair. Despite his lack of filial affection, Michel feels considerable anger towards the killer: ‘Si j’avais disposé d’une arme, je l’aurais abattu sans hésitation’ (P, 25; 20). Later, when Islamic terrorists bomb one of the Eldorador Aphrodite resorts, robbing Michel of both Valérie and his sexual Utopia in one fell swoop, his hatred of Muslims is confirmed: ‘L’islam avait brisé ma vie, et l’islam était certainement quelque chose que je pouvais haïr’ (P, 338; 349).

I would stress, again, that we should be careful not to overestimate the connection between these three narrative strands. Martin Ryle has suggested that the novel invites us to see the deprivation experienced in the French banlieues as part of a continuum that also includes the exploitation of Thai prostitutes: both are ‘part of that same system of inequality, against which brutal violence is a predictable protest’. But this seems to me too generous a reading of Plateforme: Houellebecq is no Marxist and his novel is not some attempt to identify an oppressed class consciousness existing on a global scale (if only because, as we have argued above, he shows little awareness of how Thai prostitutes are exploited). But nor is the novel some kind of reactionary call for a neocolonialism as a way of restoring order over the unruly ‘others’ who are destroying our civilisation. Houellebecq observes and recounts these different social phenomena, but the relations between them are largely circumstantial. Michel indulges in sex tourism, not out of a conscious desire to subjugate women of colour, but because he cannot get laid at home, which is seen to be a result of the troubled legacy of ‘sexual liberation’; this, in turn, has little or nothing to do with immigration into France, but was essentially an invention of the white middle class, as was amply demonstrated in Les Particules élémentaires. The murder of Michel’s father by a Muslim is a private, family affair and not really related to the civil unrest in the banlieues, where Muslims are not mentioned. The gang rapists are ‘de type antillais’ (‘West Indian’
Michel Houellebecq (P, 191; 197)), which carries no presumption of Muslim identity. Yes, Muslim terrorists are responsible for the destruction of the Eldorado Aphrodite resort, but this hardly strains the novel’s verisimilitude and, besides, Houellebecq is keen to point out that some Arab men are also clients of the sex industry in Thailand (P, 298, 337–8; 309, 349).

Nonetheless, it was the criticism of Islam that caused most trouble for Houellebecq following the publication of Plateforme. Had the expression of Islamophobia been restricted to Michel, who has a personal axe to grind, the violence of the sentiments might have been understandable. But Houellebecq has similar ideas voiced by other characters, including several Muslims themselves. This comes across as a rather cheap trick since, as Aedín Ní Loingsigh comments, these characters ‘are clearly meant to be seen as unimpeachable witnesses whose insiders’ criticism of their own religion and culture are intended to validate Michel’s prejudices’. For the reader, however, it is practically impossible to hear any difference at all between the distinctive, sardonic tone of Michel’s narratorial voice, and that employed by these Muslim characters. Thus, Aïcha, the ex-lover of Michel’s father, says of her brothers: ‘ils s’entretiennent mutuellement dans leur connerie, ils se bourrent la gueule au pastis tout en se prétendant les dépositaires de la vraie foi’ (P, 27; 22). An Egyptian that Michel met on an earlier holiday told him that: ‘L’islam ne pouvait naître que dans un désert stupide, au milieu de Bédouins crasseux qui n’avaient rien d’autre à faire […] que d’enculer leurs chameaux’ (P, 243–4; 251). Finally, a Jordanian banker tells him that Islam has no future because ‘le paradis promis par le prophète exist[e] déjà ici-bas […] il suffit d’avoir une antenne parabolique’ (P, 338–9; 350). Given that France now has the largest Muslim population of any country in Europe, estimated at somewhere between four and six million, it is perhaps not surprising that remarks like this, from so popular and prominent a writer as Houellebecq, caused consternation. A court case was mounted against Houellebecq by a group comprised of France’s Islamic League, the International Islamic League, the Grand Mosque of Lyons and the French League of Human Rights. He was tried for, and eventually acquitted of, incitement to religious hatred and making religious insults. With characteristic disingenuousness, Houellebecq has feigned surprise at the reaction provoked by the anti-islamic comments in Plateforme, claiming that he thought he was ‘stating the obvious’ and expressing his concern that ‘Le respect est devenu obligatoire, y compris pour les cultures les plus immorales et les plus sottes’ (I2, 193). Houellebecq has also tried to stipulate that his
problem is with Islam as a religion rather than with Arabs as people but, again, it is naïve to think that the two can be neatly compartmentalised in a country like France. As Martin Ryle argues: ‘Colonial history, which brought so many Arabs and Muslims to live in France, overdetermines the meaning of every sign of Islamic identity there today, and means that the abstract truth that religion is distinct from “race” is concretely a half-truth at best’.\(^{80}\) Besides, it is difficult to lend any credence to Houellebecq’s supposed respect for Arabs when his novel includes such puerile ‘jokes’ as the reference to the ‘tea-towel’ by which they can be identified (\(P, 108; 108\)).

*Plateforme*, and also Houellebecq’s other tourist narrative *Lanzarote*, are full of these kinds of national and racial stereotypes. If we were to be charitable, we might, again, put this down to Houellebecq’s dismissal of individual psychology: an acceptance that, for all practical purposes, people socialised in the same culture really are broadly alike. All the same, the stereotypes employed in these books are among the most facile and unthinking aspects of Houellebecq’s comic writing and are frequently offensive. Thus, the Japanese are ‘weird’ (\(P, 51; 47\)), all the men have strange sexual kinks, doubtless as a result of their ‘méchanceté naturelle’ (‘innate viciousness’) (\(P, 63; 60\)). The Chinese, meanwhile, are dirty, behaving, in everything they do, like pigs (\(P, 104–5; 104\)). They are also inscrutable: ‘On peut vivre parmi les Chinois pendant des années sans jamais rien comprendre à leur mode de vie’ (\(P, 261; 269\)). Europeans are perhaps more harmless but just as predictable. Germans are always the first to reserve beach chairs with their towels (\(L, 23; 23\)) and their senior citizens like to get together and sing drinking songs (\(P, 106; 105\)). Italian men are all lotharios (\(P, 265; 274\)) but Italian women are so convinced of their own beauty they become ‘imbaisables’ (‘unfuckable’) (\(L, 45–6; 56\)); as such, they compare poorly with Spanish women, who enjoy sex and often have large breasts (\(L, 45; 55–6\)). One rarely encounters the English on holiday, however, since they will only visit places favoured by other English tourists: they have no interest at all in discovering other cultures (\(L, 16; 13\)). Finally, particular scorn is reserved for less populous European nations. The only reason Norwegians exist, it seems, is to ‘accréditer cette légende selon laquelle on aurait vu des gens se baigner en janvier’ (\(L, 15; 12\)).\(^{82}\) Belgium is ‘un pays déliquescant et absurde, un pays qui n’aurait jamais dû exister’ (\(L, 30; 33\)).\(^{83}\) As for Luxembourg, it is ‘même pas un pays, en fait, plutôt un ensemble de bureaux fantômes dispersés dans des parcs, de simples boîtes postales pour les sociétés en quête d’évasion fiscale’ (\(L, 29; 32\)).\(^{84}\)
As with his portraits of tourists on holiday, however, critics have suggested that Houellebecq is acting very knowingly in his use of national caricatures and stereotypes. As we saw above, Aedín Ní Loingsigh sees predictability as being absolutely central to *Plateforme*, in such a way that Michel’s offensive remarks and attitudes become ‘almost reliably outré’. Christian Monnin argues that there is an obvious ‘burlesque’ dimension to the sweeping generalisations in *Lanzarote*, and he compares Houellebecq to the French humorist Pierre Desproges for ‘le ton peremptoire qu’il emploie volontiers pour lancer les affirmations les plus farfelues’. But Ní Loingsigh has suggested that this situation is complicated by the fact that Houellebecq’s text is ‘almost entirely devoid of irony’. What this means is that Houellebecq’s narrator is in fact just as predictable (in his behaviour and his pronouncements) as all the people he discusses. Michel, in *Plateforme*, is not employing stereotypes ironically in order to suggest his own superiority over the stereotyped – instead, he is, himself, a stereotype, and it is his discourse that reveals him as such. In addition, as Martin Ryle remarks, ‘No implied author can be located, aloof from the narration, guiding our responses’. This has two consequences: it means that Michel is a complex, flawed character, but not one who is judged by an omniscient narrator – as such he attracts a degree of sympathy; but, secondly, the absence of a higher authorial voice means that Houellebecq himself cannot easily be exonerated from implication in the offensive attitudes that Michel displays. David Sweet suggests that Houellebecq’s famous flatness of tone (already discussed in Chapter 1) plays a role here, since it ‘conveys a sustained sense of non-conviction that screens both narrator and author from any easy attribution of blame’. Not only that, but the sheer predictability of so many of these remarks begins to take on a suspicious quality: readers may begin to wonder if they are ‘being lured into a trap designed to test the predictability of their responses rather than the ethical validity of their arguments’. Marie Redonnet sees this as a typical tactic of postmodern fiction: to bait the reader with offensive material and then react to any critique with the slur of political correctness which, it is implied, is anti-literary in that it would seek to limit the freedom of expression. According to a powerful argument put forward by Ruth Cruickshank, Houellebecq is problematic – and indeed this may be the ultimate reason for all the controversy surrounding him – because commentators on his work find themselves in a no-win situation. In all of his work, Houellebecq is clear that the language he employs is by no means new but merely plucked from the ambient discourses circulating
in our society (hence the incorporation in his writing, discussed in Chapter 1, of everything from advertising copy, to sociological analysis, to pornography). In a sense, we are obliged to recognise that Houellebecq quotes the offensive stereotypes in Plateforme and Lanzarote, rather than making them up himself. But, if this is the case, then the media must recognise their own complicity in the discourses Houellebecq uses, and in the ideological crisis he describes. Simply to condemn the ideas put forward in Houellebecq’s work is, on the one hand, dishonest – a failure to see how racism, sexism, blind consumerism, etc. continue to operate in the media or, for that matter, in higher education; but it is also, on the other hand, equally predictable and ineffectual because it partakes of political correctness, an ideology that has demonstrated itself to be quite incapable of resolving the current crisis (and, as such, must be considered complicit with, or partly responsible for it). To respond to Houellebecq with political correctness is inadequate, since political correctness can do nothing but maintain the status quo, which is itself inadequate. Where will political correctness get us, asks Houellebecq: ‘On me promet juste de pouvoir continuer à me faire chier, de pouvoir acheter des polos Ralph Lauren...’ (I2, 205).93

The difficulty commentators find in situating a solidly grounded critique of Houellebecq is also related to his complex position vis-à-vis French identity. In many ways, Houellebecq and his protagonists can be seen as very normal, unremarkable people. Michel says of himself, at the end of Plateforme, ‘j’aurai été un individu médiocre, sous tous ses aspects’ (P, 350; 361).94 (We must of course avoid the temptation to align narrator and author too closely but, given the overlap between many of Michel’s pronouncements and Houellebecq’s own statements in interview, a degree of rapprochement is permitted. The difference, naturally, is that Michel has not written several best-selling novels.) Pierre Varrod remarks that Houellebecq is, in many ways, and by his own admission, an average Frenchman, and conscious of being so. This very self-consciousness, however, creates a kind of doubling effect, which immediately means that Houellebecq is not so average after all. He is exposed to two risks of misinterpretation, then: readers may take him as just an average Frenchman, and overlook the extra level of awareness; or they may focus on the heightened awareness and miss what makes Houellebecq so unremarkable.95 In some ways, suggests Aedín Ní Loingsigh, Houellebecq perhaps serves as a useful reminder that not all French people are the cultivated, right-thinking liberals that the media might like to have us believe.96 We need to recognise, however, that this
notion of Houellebecq as ‘average’ is itself ideologically determined, that is to say the kind of socio-economic profile that can present itself as average (white, middle-class, educated, male, heterosexual) is the one with the power (economic, cultural and symbolic) to do so. Marc Weitzmann has commented that Houellebecq’s social documenting is precise and detailed, but only so long as he remains within the confines of his familiar sphere, that of the French middle classes.  

I would go further and suggest that this narrow perspective is not only middle-class but also metropolitan and childless. In Plateforme, the true limits of Michel’s world view are revealed when he proves totally unable to imagine who could be responsible for the global success of sportswear brands like Nike and Adidas: ‘il devait y avoir des secteurs entiers de la société qui me demeuraient étrangers’ (P, 263; 272). This suggests not only that Michel has never been inside a gym, but also, and more improbably, that he has never come within sight of a schoolyard in a provincial town anywhere in the western world. In fairness, however, Houellebecq has defended his right to speak from a personal point of view in his writing. Contemporary French literature is commonly accused of ‘navel-gazing’, but Houellebecq expresses his impatience with this view, suggesting that to pretend to speak of, or for, wider humanity without first speaking of oneself would be dishonest. ‘Il est bien plus facile qu’on ne l’imagine d’atteindre l’universel en parlant de soi’, says Houellebecq (I2, 212), if only because, to rehearse a now familiar argument, people are less different than we would like to believe.

But the situation is more complicated still. One the one hand, Houellebecq is to be regarded as ‘average’ and represents a position of relative wealth, privilege and status in French society. Yet, on the other hand, he – or at least his narrator – is so cut off from the life of French society that we are invited to believe he does not know a single person who owns a pair of trainers! In other words, Houellebecq is both at the centre of French society and on the margins (and this is reflected in his position as a writer: the best-selling and most talked about French author of recent years, yet living in exile in Ireland). John McCann suggests that there are two quite distinct visions of France in Plateforme. First, there is a France that is well integrated, successful and harmonious – this is the France of Michel’s favourite game show, Questions pour un champion, which gives the general impression that ‘les gens sont heureux’ (‘people are happy’ (P, 13; 8)). Coexisting alongside this France, however, is a France in crisis, where social cohesion has failed and society is close to chaos – the France, let us say, where women are gang
raped on the RER. Houellebecq, it seems, lives in both versions of France at once (that is, to the extent that he lives in France at all; but we must surely accept that even if he is resident, for tax purposes, in Ireland, Houellebecq continues to spend a lot of time in France). The uncertainty is further reflected in Houellebecq’s ambivalent attitude towards state authorities like the police. In *Ennemis publics*, he expresses his horror of bullying and mob violence and counts himself lucky that he lives in a ‘reasonably well-policing state’ and so has not had to face vigilante reprisals following his controversial publications (*EP*, 16–17; 12). This bespeaks a confidence, proper to the ruling class, that the police are there for his protection rather than to persecute him. Yet, some seventy pages later, he complains about the excessive policing of the state and expresses his sense, as a smoker, of being harassed and excluded from society: public space, he laments, has become ‘un territoire hostile, zébré d’interdictions absurdes et humiliantes [...] un territoire de toute façon où je ne suis absolument pas le bienvenu, où je n’ai pas ma place, où rien d’intéressant ni d’agréable ne peut m’arriver’ (*EP*, 86; 82). There is, I would argue, no ‘solution’ to this awkward problem of Houellebecq’s cultural positioning, and indeed we might suggest that it is partly responsible for his popularity: his ability to cast himself as a victim while still speaking from a position of relative power undoubtedly speaks to an embattled sense of cultural authority among the educated middle classes in France, who have seen their naturalised sense of security and entitlement come under threat from the social unrest on the margins of French society, from the declining global influence of their national culture, and from the unpredictable push-and-pull of an unrestrained global marketplace. The position of Houellebecq and his protagonists is shared by his readers: suspicious of a state and a bourgeois culture for which they have been taught to nurture a healthy contempt, yet feeling nervous, unprotected and alone faced with a global culture whose unregulated market forces have the power to determine the shape of their lives.

*La Carte et le territoire*

*France and the World*

The tense and evolving relationship between France and the world is also central to *La Carte et le territoire*. In this novel, a young visual artist, Jed Martin, finds success with a series of paintings depicting
different professions. He asks the famous writer Michel Houellebecq to write the text for his exhibition catalogue and, in exchange, paints a portrait of Houellebecq to be included in his series and subsequently offered as a gift to the writer. (In other words, Houellebecq appears as a character in his own novel, a phenomenon we will consider in detail in the final section of this chapter.) At the end of the novel, ‘Houellebecq’ is the victim of a gruesome murder, the motive for which turns out to be the theft of his valuable portrait. *La Carte et le territoire* has quite a complex temporal organisation, with many chapters referring to two or more different historical moments. Careful reconstruction of the novel’s timeline, however, reveals that the opening chapter begins (a few months before Jed paints Houellebecq’s portrait) at around about the time of the book’s publication, that is approximately 2010, or perhaps a few years later. The narrative then reaches back to recall Jed’s youth in the 1980s and 1990s and stretches forward some twenty or thirty years into the mid-twenty-first century. In other words, the novel constitutes, among other things, a depiction of today’s France, with reference to its recent past and its probable near future.

The France of *La Carte et le territoire* bears some similarity to that of *Plateforme*. The country is marked by social tensions: Jed’s wealthy father lives in a large house in the Parisian suburb of Le Raincy that he bought several decades ago and that has since been surrounded by underprivileged housing estates controlled by gangs; Jed cannot find a taxi firm willing him to take him all the way there (*CT*, 17; 6). His father, grown infirm, relies on the help of a Senegalese carer supplied by the local council, yet relations between them are strained and mistrustful, the helper doing the bare minimum of work around the house (*CT*, 18; 6). Meanwhile, in Paris itself, Jed finds a group of homeless men squatting in the courtyard of his building during the Christmas holidays (*CT*, 26–7; 11). These signs of a fractured society are accompanied by indications of economic decline. The property market has collapsed, with prices in free fall and buildings standing empty for want of buyers (*CT*, 44; 24). The trend for foreigners to invest in second homes in the French countryside also appears to be over, the market among the British having dried up following the financial crisis of the late 2000s (*CT*, 57–8; 33–4). Traditional markers of French social life such as the proletarian café are close to extinction, having been gradually killed off by changing lifestyles and definitively brought to an end by the ban on smoking in public places (*CT*, 109; 69–70). If we are to believe *La Carte et le territoire*, the high points of French culture today are
incarnated by the likes of Julien Lepers, presenter of the television game show *Questions pour un champion* (*CT*, 50; 28), or Pierre Bellemare, ‘roi français du téléachat’ (‘the French king of teleshopping’ (*CT*, 232; 157)). Michel Houellebecq’s novels have always combined a truly global reach (hence his worldwide success) with a curiously parochial focus on personalities, behaviours and concerns that mean little outside France. This contrast is brought into particularly sharp relief in *La Carte et le territoire* which mentions several minor celebrities from the French media and is partly concerned with the current and future state of the so-called ‘France profonde’, the country’s rural heartland. The novel displays somewhat ambivalent sentiments towards this traditional, provincial France. On the one hand, we find comically unequivocal statements like this one:

> en dehors de certaines zones très touristiques comme l’arrière-pays provençal ou la Dordogne, les habitants des zones rurales sont en général inhospitaliers, agressifs et stupides […] A la question de savoir quand un étranger au pays pouvait se faire accepter dans une zone rurale française, la réponse était: *jamais*.102 (*CT*, 393; 278)

On the other hand, when Jed attends the funeral of his grandmother in the small village where she lived in the Limousin, something about the life of the community strikes him as more *authentic*. He notes that this funeral ‘à l’ancienne’ is more dignified, respectful and serious than anything he has witnessed in Paris where you are lucky if the congregation even turn off their mobile phones (*CT*, 53; 30). Later, he decides to keep his grandmother’s old house, since it inspires in him sentiments seemingly vanished from the world of the young: ‘Il était tenté dans cette maison de croire à des choses telles que l’amour, l’amour réciproque du couple qui irradie les murs d’une certaine chaleur douce qui se transmet aux futurs occupants pour leur apporter la paix de l’âme’ (*CT*, 57; 33).103

At the same time as looking inward to ‘la France profonde’, however, *La Carte et le territoire* is also aware that France is, more than ever, dependent on business and trade with other nations if its economy is to survive. Jed’s father did not make his money in France but by constructing holiday resorts in Portugal, the Maldives and the Caribbean (*CT*, 35; 18). Throughout *La Carte et le territoire*, there are indications that the economy and culture of France, and more generally of western nations, are being eclipsed by the rise of Asian powers. It is significant that when Jed paints a portrait of contemporary artists Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst he sets it against a middle-eastern background, drawn
from the publicity images of a hotel in Abu Dhabi (CT, 9; 1), as though to imply the influence exerted over the art market by finance originating in the oil of the Persian Gulf. Elsewhere, the decisive influence of the Indian and Chinese economies is felt over the future cultural life of France. Jed’s portrait of Michel Houellebecq will eventually be sold to an Indian mobile phone mogul (CT, 394; 278). It is notable too that when the omniscient narration – seemingly enunciated from a perspective at least fifty years in the future – evokes commentators on Jed Martin’s work the most significant of them are Chinese, one Wong Fu Xin in particular (CT, 117, 180; 75, 120). The western hegemony over cultural discourse is just another thing we will have to learn to live without, implies Houellebecq, even as countries like France seek to adapt their hospitality industry to cater to a majority of Chinese tourists.

Because, where Plateforme analysed the motivations and manoeuvres of French citizens travelling to distant corners of the globe in search of touristic satisfaction, La Carte et le territoire reflects on France itself as a tourist destination. After decades, indeed centuries, of rural exodus in France, Houellebecq’s new novel predicts the imminent rediscovery of the French countryside: ‘pour la première fois en réalité en France depuis Jean-Jacques Rousseau, la campagne était redevenue tendance’ (CT, 87; 54).104 Houellebecq identifies important precursors to this movement, such as the television presenter Jean-Pierre Pernaut who shrewdly steered the afternoon news broadcast away from distressing international stories and towards reassuring reportages about the character, landscape and traditional practices of France’s regions (CT, 227; 153–4). A similar nostalgia for ‘la France profonde’ may have been exploited, suggests Houellebecq, by the campaign slogan ‘La force tranquille’, which ensured François Mitterrand’s re-election in 1988, doubtless largely through its appeal to the heartland (CT, 227; 154). The traditional France of the regions, if it has largely disappeared from the daily life of their inhabitants, is now exploited by the high-end hospitality industry with its foregrounding of products from the French terroir. Thus, ‘Chez Anthony et Georges’, an exclusive Parisian restaurant run by a metropolitan gay couple, sources all of its furniture and tableware in antique stores and proudly vaunts its crayfish freshly delivered from the Limousin, or its vintage 1905 armagnac (CT, 64–5, 83; 38, 51). Similarly, the chain of luxury hotels in the provinces, dubbed ‘French Touch’, overseen by Jed’s sometime girlfriend Olga, offers a seductive combination of traditional French pleasures and pursuits together with the highest standards of comfort for hedonistic guests (CT, 98–9; 62–3).
Experience shows that the most popular dishes in these establishments are those drawing on traditional local cuisine, such as cheese and pork products, but especially unusual animals like wood pigeon, snails or lamprey: what the guests at these hotels seek is ‘une expérience gastronomique vintage, voire hardcore’ (CT, 95; 60). It is perhaps not necessary to add that the customers for such an experience are not French (and certainly not the traditional French peasant class who might once have hunted wood pigeon or collected snails for their own sustenance); the French, we are told, can no longer really afford to holiday in France, and the tourism industry is instead dedicated to incoming Chinese, Indians and Russians (CT, 66; 39). With its manufacturing industry long dead, the economy of France’s near future relies, in Houellebecq’s prediction, upon the maintenance of a loosely defined art de vivre that can be sold to representatives of emerging economies in the form of potted meats and four-star hotel breaks. The appearance of traditional French villages is scrupulously maintained – ‘ici, on ne plaisantait pas avec le patrimoine’ (CT, 246; 167) – but no one really lives in them: the village to which the fictional Houellebecq retires in the Loiret in central France gives the impression of ‘un village faux, reconstitué pour les besoins d’une série télévisée’ (‘a fake village recreated for a television series’ (CT, 270; 185)). The tourist France described in La Carte et le territoire comes across, above all, as hyperreal – a term first popularised in the late 1970s by Umberto Eco, writing about American culture. In hyperreality, as Eco describes it, it is more important that a place, an object or an experience should seem real than that it should actually be real. Or, more to the point, such a distinction effectively disappears because looking or seeming real is equated with being real. Why travel to Europe to see the paintings of old masters when you can see an exact replica in California? Similarly, why worry about the disappearance of traditional rural culture in France when that culture is replicated in world-class hotels marketed at the wealthiest of populations? The very name ‘French Touch’ is representative of this shift: it implies that the experience on offer in these hotels is not simply French but has an extra touch of Frenchness; it is, in a sense, more French than French.

Emblematic of these shifts is the French company Michelin, which looms large in La Carte et le territoire. Michelin, as is well known, is principally a tyre manufacturer based in the provincial town of Clermont-Ferrand. The company has, however, diversified into the production of maps and, notably, restaurant and tourist guide books. This allows Houellebecq to imagine further logical developments for Michelin,
Michel Houellebecq

for instance in the hospitality industry or the media (developing its own travel-related television channel). Jed comes into contact with the company after realising a long series of art works based around close-up photography of details from Michelin road maps. He meets Olga, who has emigrated from Russia and is overseeing many of the company’s new ventures, including the project to open a space devoted to contemporary art in Paris. From being a family company based in the Auvergne with a stake in traditional French culture, especially cuisine, Michelin has thus become a multinational concern with a diverse portfolio of interests. Michelin’s enthusiastic participation in the culture of a hyperreal France is demonstrated when Jed attends the launch party for Michelin TV, where he is greeted by fanfares played on traditional Breton bagpipes and served gewurtztraminer by waitresses in ‘typical’ Alsatian dress (CT, 231; 156). Jed’s work with Michelin maps becomes, in Houellebecq’s novel, an important metaphorical (or metonymic) representation of this replacement of France by its hyperreal double. As mentioned above, Jed’s photographs emphasise details of Michelin’s maps – notably those of rural areas – by composing in depth and from unexpected angles. The resulting exhibition is entitled ‘La carte est plus intéressante que le territoire’ (‘The map is more interesting than the territory’ (CT, 80; 48)), and demonstrates its point by juxtaposing Jed’s compositions with satellite photos of the same parts of the country: where the satellite images show blandly uniform patches of green and blue, the maps are full of picturesque features and intriguing detail, coming across, in sum, as ‘un territoire de rêve, féerique et inviolable’ (‘a dream territory, fairy-like and inviolable’ (CT, 63; 37)). The France of Jed’s photographs is a hyperreal one, more interesting – because more ‘real’, more detailed and precise – than the real one. In any case, as Houellebecq points out in the novel, topography is unstable, and as much a function of economics and geopolitics as it is of geology and tectonics. At Ireland’s Shannon airport, Jed notices the large number of low-cost flights departing to cities in Poland and the Canary Islands, the former serving Ireland’s large community of Polish immigrants, the latter catering to Irish tourists on cheap package holidays. This example demonstrates how a kind of virtual world can be overlaid on the physical one according to the rules of economic supply and demand. As Houellebecq puts it, ‘A la surface plane, isométrique de la carte du monde se substituait une topographie anormale où Shannon était plus proche de Katowice que de Bruxelles, de Fuerteventura que de Madrid’ (CT, 148; 98).108
Labour and art
If *La Carte et le territoire* questions the very possibility of identifying an ‘authentic’ France today, it raises a similar query about the nature of work in the twenty-first century. Jed is an artist who makes his name through portraits of different artisans and professionals plying their trades and the status and evolution of work, together with the relations between art and other forms of labour, become important themes in the novel. As in *Plateforme*, the overwhelming place that work occupies in people’s lives is acknowledged in *La Carte et le territoire*. Jed looks wistfully around himself while sat in an airport: ‘Pour ce qu’il avait pu en observer l’existence des hommes s’organisait autour du travail, qui occupait la plus grande partie de la vie’ (*CT*, 102–3; 65). (We see here a return to the kind of distant, posthumanist narratorial perspective of a complete alien to human society that Houellebecq has used repeatedly in the past, especially in the science-fiction narratives of *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île*.) In our societies, it is their job that most completely defines the identity of adults more than their relationship status or family: ‘C’est sa place dans le processus de production, et pas son statut de reproducteur, qui définit avant tout l’homme occidental’ (*CT*, 154; 101). But, as we saw above in relation to *Plateforme*, despite its crucial importance to individuals’ identity, work has largely ceased to have much meaningful relation to the world around us. Few of us have any understanding of how to adapt or modify the physical world now that artisanal labour has largely disappeared. In *La Carte et le territoire*, such traditional trades have been relegated almost exclusively to the hospitality industry where that very tradition is recycled and rebranded as part of an establishment’s hyperreal appeal, as in the cuisine ‘à l’ancienne’ that Jed eats with his father in a restaurant called Chez Papa (*CT*, 19–20; 7).

The novel begins when Jed experiences problems with his water heater and searches desperately for a plumber who will come out during the Christmas vacation. Houellebecq fondly ironises the touching naivety of the names of small plumbing businesses: ‘*Simplement plombiers*’ (‘Simply Plumbers’) or ‘*Plomberie en général*’ (‘Plumbing in General’) (*CT*, 13; 3). The plumber Jed eventually finds is not French at all but Croatian – a further indictment of the decline of useful trades in the west – and even he is seeking only to make some fast money before returning to his home country with the intention of hiring out jet skis to tourists. ‘Jed ressentit une déception humaine obscure à l’idée de cet homme abandonnant la plomberie, artisanat noble, pour louer des
engins bruyants et stupides à des petits péteux bourrés de fric habitant rue de la Faisanderie’ (CT, 27–8; 12). This notion of a ‘noble trade’, for which Houellebecq seems to be nostalgic at certain moments of La Carte et le territoire, is quite historically specific, as Dominique Méda has usefully pointed out in a book entitled Le Travail: Une valeur en voie de disparition? (‘Work: An Endangered Value?’). The notion of the dignity of labour, Méda argues, belongs very much to the nineteenth century, having grown out of the philosophy of Hegel and, especially, Marx. In this humanist conception, work is a dialectical process whereby man transforms the world through his action upon it and, in the process, comes to know the full extent of his own capacities; full self-realisation, in other words, can only be achieved through work whose ultimate goal is nothing other than the transformation and perfection of man. It is this same conception of work that inspires the great socialist reformers of the nineteenth century such as Charles Fourier and William Morris, both of whom have a distinct, if discreet, presence in La Carte et le territoire. Jed’s father has a large library of works devoted to nineteenth-century thinkers and regales his son on several occasions with the ideas of Fourier and Morris, as well as Alexis de Tocqueville. Their intrusion into the novel adds to the sense that Houellebecq is encouraging a reflection on the nature of work and its relationship to art. William Morris, in particular, was a staunch critic of the work–art dichotomy and, more generally, of the opposition between work and leisure, arguing that so long as people took no pleasure in their work no meaningful social change could be accomplished. Morris’s utopian novel News from Nowhere (1890) imagines a moneyless, governmentless society based around gift exchange and in which people do the work that they want to do because they want to. In this society, all work is looked upon as a kind of art and, as one character remarks, ‘it is this change which makes all the others possible’. What, then, does Houellebecq have to say about art in La Carte et le territoire? How, and why, is the labour of artistic creation different from other kinds of work? If the novel constitutes, at least in part, an enquiry into this problem, it does seem, at times, to uphold a rather traditional, romantic view of art. The most obvious distinction between art and other forms of work is that art is non-utilitarian. For instance, Jed compares his own work to that of his father, an architect, and hence also a creator of forms; the difference is that the forms that Jed creates are not ones in which anyone could live (CT, 37; 19). As Julian Stallabrass has remarked, the peculiar value of art relies precisely on its
uselessness: ‘Art appears to stand outside [the] realm of rigid instrumentality, bureaucratized life, and its complementary mass culture’.115 This distinction between utilitarian work and non-utilitarian art is mapped, to some extent in the novel, on to a division between photography and painting. Jed begins his artistic career as a photographer, creating two lengthy series of images of inanimate objects – first, metal tools and, second, the Michelin maps. But, when he turns to representing people with his series of ‘Métiers’, he feels the need to return to painting (CT, 139; 92). Somehow, with a model as subjective and hard to pin down as a human being, the unambiguous indexicality of a photograph seems inappropriate. The character Houellebecq confirms Jed’s intuition when he tells him (and this is before the portrait has even been painted): ‘j’ai été pris en photo des milliers de fois, mais s’il y a une image de moi, une seule, qui persistera dans les siècles à venir, ce sera votre tableau’ (CT, 173; 114).116 In places, too, La Carte et le territoire purveys a romantic notion of artistic inspiration. At one point, Jed is asked what it means to be an artist:

être artiste, à ses yeux, c’était avant tout être quelqu’un de soumis. Soumis à des messages mystérieux, imprévisibles, qu’on devait donc faute de mieux et en l’absence de toute croyance religieuse qualifier d’intuitions; messages qui n’en commandaient pas moins de manière impérieuse, catégorique, sans laisser la moindre possibilité de s’y soustraire – sauf à perdre toute notion d’intégrité et tout respect de soi-même.117 (CT, 104; 66) The novel is also largely faithful to the notion that artists should have a distinct authorial signature which transcribes a unique world view. This is offered as the standard criterion of value in art history: ‘les grands peintres du passé étaient considérés comme tels lorsqu’ils avaient développé du monde une vision à la fois cohérente et innovante […] Ils étaient encore davantage estimés en tant que peintres lorsque leur vision du monde paraissait exhaustive’ (CT, 36; 19).118 It is these same qualities that are used to consecrate Jed as an important artist: the exhibition catalogue that ‘Houellebecq’ writes stresses the ‘unity’ of Jed’s work, its ‘deep logic’ (CT, 183; 122). This is particularly reassuring to Franz, the gallery owner who exhibits Jed’s work, since he had warned that the media are often very unforgiving of artists who change direction (in this case, Jed’s switch from photography to painting) (CT, 154; 102).

At times, then, La Carte et le territoire appears thoroughly beholden to what Julian Stallabrass calls ‘those old notions of art’s ineffability,
touched more with mysticism than analysis’, a conception of artistic creation that, arguably, constitutes little more than ‘naked propaganda’ for artists and their works. To uphold this traditional view of art as belonging to a unique and rarefied domain – some kind of pure economy of inspiration – is to ignore the extent to which art is bound up with other forms of work, business and monetary exchange. As Stallabrass comments: ‘the economy of art closely reflects the economy of finance capital’. He goes on:

Art prices and the volume of art sales tend to match the stock markets closely, and it is no accident that the world’s major financial centres are also the principal centres for the sale of art. To raise this parallel is to see art not only as a zone of purposeless free play but as a minor speculative market in which art works are used for a variety of instrumental purposes, including investment, tax avoidance and money laundering.

Stallabrass, then, opposes what we might call a posthumanist view of art to the romantic conception of the artist that grows out of humanism and that combines ideals of self-realisation with the myth of a spiritualised inspiration. But Houellebecq’s novel is also clearly aware of this less romantic, more hard-headed side of the art world. Indeed, given his phenomenal success and the unprecedented publishing contracts he has enjoyed, it would be singularly disingenuous of the author to feign ignorance of the pecuniary motives so often driving the cultural sector. Jed himself is not unaware of the importance of figures in the art world. If he chooses to paint Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons as part of his ‘Métiers’ series it is because they represent the first and second largest personal fortunes amassed through the sale of artworks. Jed himself, at least prior to his sudden, vertiginous promotion in the market with this series of paintings, had never risen above 583rd in the ranks of global art sales (CT, 29; 13). Unsure of his own value, Jed initially starts selling prints of his Michelin photographs at €200 each, only to revise the price up to €2,000 when he sees how quickly they sell out (CT, 91; 57). When the ‘Métiers’ series is first exhibited the paintings are sold for €500,000 each and Jed is contacted by some of the wealthiest businessmen in the world seeking to commission portraits of themselves (CT, 200–1; 133–4). By the time the portrait of Michel Houellebecq is stolen its value is estimated at €12 million (CT, 381; 268). In this context, the idea that people make art out of some irresistible impulse, in response to mysterious voices, rings rather false. Indeed, Jed’s father remarks at one point in the novel: ‘on pourrait croire que le besoin de s’exprimer, de laisser une trace dans le
monde, est une force puissante; et pourtant en général ça ne suffit pas. Ce qui marche le mieux, ce qui pousse avec la plus grande violence les gens à se dépasser, c'est encore le pur et simple besoin d’argent’. In a self-indicting comment, Jed suggests that if there has been something of a return to painting in contemporary art it is doubtless largely for commercial reasons: ‘Un objet, c’est plus facile à stocker et à revendre qu’une installation, ou qu’une performance’.

By the same token, Houellebecq is lucid about the reasons that might persuade ‘Houellebecq’ to write an exhibition catalogue: as Frédéric Beigbeder, also appearing as a character in the novel, points out, ‘Houellebecq’ is likely to do it for the money; after all, his venture into the Spanish property market fell through and, in addition, ‘son divorce l’a complètement séché’ (‘his divorce has left him high and dry’). The base motive behind much of the art world also explains the murder narrative that occupies the final third of the novel. Given the horrifically gory crime scene, the investigating detective Jasselin initially believes he is searching for a rare breed of psychopath – a crazed fan, or perhaps a serial murderer. He is almost disappointed when he learns the value of the stolen painting: ‘Il était assez déprimant de retomber en fin de compte sur la motivation criminelle la plus répandue, la plus universelle: l’argent’.

Still, Jed’s art, however much it is seen to be inseparable from financial considerations, plays a crucial role in La Carte et le territoire in encouraging us to think through this relationship between art and work. We are told that the future art historians who look back upon Jed’s œuvre retrospectively interpret his entire output as ‘un hommage au travail humain’ (‘a hommage to human labour’). Indeed, his first major project, begun at art school, was a vast collection of photographs of objects comprising ‘un catalogue exhaustif des objets de fabrication humaine à l’âge industriel’ (‘an exhaustive catalogue of the objects of human manufacturing in the industrial age’). But, even if Jed realises thousands of these photographs, the moment he starts to receive commissions to shoot objects for commercial catalogues he feels obliged to renounce artistic photography: ‘Comme si le fait qu’il en soit venu à photographier ces objets dans un but purement professionnel, commercial, invalidait toute possibilité de les utiliser dans un projet créateur’.

If such considerations would seem to reinforce the idea that art is a domain apart that refuses to play by the same rules as other professional activities, elsewhere Houellebecq’s detailed descriptions of Jed’s work serve to underline the professionalism of his
art. Houellebecq relates in precise detail the kinds of cameras and lenses Jed uses in his photographs, the types of paper and paint he favours for his portraits, as well as the painstaking process whereby he films and edits his final series of video works. Such detail serves to underline the real labour that goes into the artistic process and, by extension, implies the hard work – the long and complicated process of construction – of the novel itself, since it demonstrates the amount of research that must have gone into preparing La Carte et le territoire.

Naturally, Jed’s series of ‘Métiers’ paintings are crucial to the novel’s reflection on work. The first paintings in the series represent people in professions that are already dying out, such as a horsemeat butcher or the owner of a bar and tobacconist’s shop. It is suggested that Jed chose them as subjects not so much out of nostalgia for a bygone era, but simply in order to capture their forms on canvas before they disappeared altogether (CT, 116–17; 75). Or, as ‘Houellebecq’ comments, if Jed is nostalgic, his is a nostalgia for the modern world, for ‘l’époque où la France était un pays industriel’ (‘the time when France was an industrial country’ (CT, 165; 109)). The Chinese commentator Wong Fu Xin suggests that the ‘Métiers’ series was an attempt to produce an exhaustive portrait of society through a selection of its most representative professions (CT, 117–18; 76). These range from simple artisans like those described above to the CEOs of multinational corporations, as in the portrait of Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, described at length in the novel and taken to constitute nothing less than ‘a brief history of capitalism’ (CT, 188; 125). Through the facial expressions and bodily dispositions of the two figures, as well as a symbolic chess game on the table between them, the painting seeks to represent the different facets of capitalism incarnated by the two men: the risks of innovation, represented by Jobs and Apple versus the strategy of market saturation and mass popularisation endorsed by Gates and Microsoft (CT, 186–8; 124–5). But, if all these works are imbued with a kind of nostalgia for the present or recent past, this implies that the history of capitalism they trace is nearing its end. It is suggested that we are inhabiting a peculiar kind of limbo in which the bankruptcy of capitalism as a social and economic model has been amply demonstrated, yet no plausible alternative has yet been promoted:

on vivait une période idéologiquement étrange, où tout un chacun en Europe occidentale semblait persuadé que le capitalisme était condamné, et même condamné à brève échéance, qu’il vivait ses toutes dernières années, sans que pourtant les partis d’ultra-gauche ne parviennent à
séduire au-delà de leur clientèle habituelle de masochistes hargneux.\textsuperscript{126} (\textit{CT}, 382–3; 269–70)

An even more calmly apocalyptic message is conveyed by Jed’s final set of works, evoked in the novel’s epilogue. In these video works, Jed uses time-lapse photography and a complex series of superimpositions to show the decomposition (accelerated through the application of sulphuric acid) of industrial products like mobile phones, computer mother boards or toy figurines that are gradually submerged by vegetation. If this series thus constitutes another nostalgic meditation on the end of the industrial era in the west, its scale transforms the project into a reflection on ‘le caractère périssable et transitoire de toute industrie humaine’ or indeed on ‘l’anéantissement généralisé de l’espèce humaine’ (\textit{CT}, 414; 291).\textsuperscript{127} \textit{La Carte et le territoire} ends, then, with a vision of the end of humanity, just like earlier novels by Houellebecq, albeit, this time, without the need for genetic engineering, and this vision stands as the logical culmination of the detached, posthumanist account of the artistic process that accrues over the course of the novel. The value of Jed’s art works – and this is a value that inheres in them even if they only exist in the verbal form imagined by Houellebecq – is in opening up a space for us to reflect on the nature of work, a space that can exist apart from, or alongside, the endless cycle of production and consumption, even if it cannot ever escape fully from the all-inclusive grasp of the capitalist marketplace. Such a space for reflection is vital, argues Dominique Méda in his critical analysis of work, when our political culture seems incapable of conceiving of work aside from its obsession with economic growth.\textsuperscript{128} If work serves only as a measure of growth and national wealth, then workers can only ever be irreparably alienated from their activity and worklessness can only ever be regarded with suspicion and punished. Yet a more considered reflection, that seeks to step outside this vicious circle, might ask whether indefinite growth is really a desirable goal, or whether full employment is still a worthy ambition for a society. Persisting with the current economic model can only serve to reinforce the increasingly deep divisions within our societies. If we are to avoid the descent of those societies into ever more serious internal conflict, it is urgent that we rethink the bases of social cohesion, an enquiry that must ask, among other things, what we mean by, and what we want out of, work.\textsuperscript{129}

\textit{Self-portrait(s)}

The complex meditation on issues of authenticity that characterises \textit{La Carte et le territoire} – where and how would we locate an ‘authentic’
France today in a country that has become a simulacrum of itself; where, if anywhere, can we find traces of authentic, meaningful, non-alienated labour and how can art help us to think through the processes and products of our work? – also affects Houellebecq’s casting of himself as a character in the fiction since we cannot help but ask to what extent the fictional Houellebecq resembles the real one: who, or where, is the authentic Houellebecq in this game of mirrors? The fact that the narrative centres around a portrait of Houellebecq adds to this effect: this portrait painted by Jed becomes a self-portrait (since Jed is already a creation of Houellebecq’s imagination) within the larger self-portrait that is Houellebecq’s appearance as a character in the novel. It is thus a kind of self-portrait en abyme and Houellebecq clearly takes great relish in describing the painting in almost apocalyptic terms: ‘l’auteur parait en état de transe, possédé par une furie que certains n’ont pas hésité à qualifier de démoniaque’ (CT, 180; 119). Subsequent art historians could identify no pictorial tradition to which the subject’s extraordinary gaze belonged aside from ‘certaines images d’archives ethnologiques prises au cours de cérémonies vaudous’ (CT, 181; 120). The novel contains a number of knowing asides on the subject of self-portraits – so many ironic winks aimed at the reader – as when it is revealed that Jed, despite his vast experience of photography, does not possess a single picture of himself and that the idea of realising a self-portrait has never occurred to him: ‘jamais il ne s’était considéré, si peu que ce soit, comme un sujet artistique valable’ (CT, 398; 281).

The portrait that Houellebecq sketches of himself in La Carte et le territoire appears, in many respects, to be an honest and accurate one, at least based on the impression we, as readers, have of the man from interviews, profiles and television appearances. Houellebecq acknowledges the acute awkwardness for others who find themselves in his company, his lengthy silences and his distraction (CT, 136; 89). He is practically a chain-smoker (CT, 138; 91) and also represented as drinking a lot, though this is clearly in significant measure a response to severe social anxiety (CT, 142; 94). He exhibits a naive enthusiasm for a handful of consumer products, as when he weeps at the memory of his favourite parka being discontinued (CT, 166; 110). In many respects, Houellebecq is unsparing in his depiction of himself and the portrait often comes across as very sad. Michel Houellebecq is first presented as ‘un solitaire à fortes tendances misanthropiques, c’est à peine s’il adressait la parole à son chien’ (CT, 124; 81).
clearly depressed (CT, 160; 105). His house is barely furnished, with several boxes still unpacked three years after his move (CT, 134; 88). Since he is not expecting any visits, he moves his bed into the living room (CT, 161; 106); he tells Jed he cannot wait for the days to end so that he can take to his bed (CT, 140–1; 93). Houellebecq has become ‘manifestly indifferent’ to all human relations (CT, 170–1; 113). Indeed, when investigating his murder, the police discover that he has had no contact with any family for over ten years (CT, 301; 208). In places, this can come across as somewhat self-pitying. Houellebecq complains to Jed about being hated by the French media ‘to an incredible degree’ (CT, 143; 95). He suffers from an eczematic skin condition and wails ‘j’ai été honteusement abandonné par la médecine’ (CT, 173; 114). Sometimes he sounds like a character from one of his earlier novels, whining, ‘ma vie s’achève, et je suis déçu. Rien de ce que j’espérais dans ma jeunesse ne s’est produit’ (CT, 252; 171). But the novel’s self-awareness is such that this self-pity never has the chance to grow tiresome but is pulled up short by another perspective: ‘Là, j’ai l’impression que vous jouez un peu votre propre rôle…’, says Jed (CT, 141; 93). For the most part, Houellebecq’s self-portrait is comically self-deprecating. When Jed first visits him, Houellebecq says he wil recognise the house by its lawn, the worst-kept in the neighbourhood ‘and perhaps in all of Ireland’ (CT, 133; 87). He explains that he is afraid of getting a lawnmower for fear of cutting off his fingers, and had considered getting a sheep instead but does not like them: ‘Il n’y a pas plus con qu’un mouton’ (CT, 134; 88). Later, when he gets drunk and carried away, Houellebecq starts making up words, ‘worthy of Captain Haddock’ (CT, 168; 111). The last literary work he accomplishes before his death is a poem about his dog, Plato. He proudly states: ‘c’est un des meilleurs poèmes jamais écrits sur la philosophie de Platon – et probablement aussi sur les chiens’ (CT, 249; 169). In one brilliantly accurate and unbelievably self-sabotaging line, Houellebecq is described as resembling ‘une vieille tortue malade’ (‘a sick old turtle’ (CT, 162; 107)). (It is tempting to believe that the photograph of the author on the novel’s back cover, particularly unflattering, was chosen specifically in order to confirm the validity of this comparison.) In short, Houellebecq has a rather clever way, in this novel, of feeling sorry for himself, yet at the same time coming off rather well. Philippe Gasparini has remarked about ageing writers’ depictions of themselves in print: ‘les portraits de l’artiste en vieil homme évitent difficilement l’écueil de la complaisance [mais], d’autre part […] cette faiblesse, traduisant leur angoisse, les rend attachants’. (We might note, in passing, that
Michel Houellebecq takes the same approach to another real-life figure who appears as a character in the novel: his contemporary in French literature Frédéric Beigbeder. Houellebecq is not shy about depicting Beigbeder’s drug use, his vanity or his thirst for publicity, yet ultimately pays him the high compliment of describing him as ‘une sorte de Sartre des années 2010’ (CT, 126; 83). Finally, the narrative of his own murder allows Houellebecq to indulge the fantasy of imagining his own death and observing his own funeral, exerting creative power over that domain in which we are most powerless. He takes pleasure in imagining the hypocritical, empty phrases pronounced by newspapers and politicians after his death (CT, 303; 210), describes his own gravestone (a ground-level slab of black basalt inscribed with the image of a Möbius strip (CT, 309; 214)), pictures a small crowd of 100 people respectfully following the funeral procession, and offers the romantic image of an unidentified woman in her thirties throwing a single white rose on the coffin as it is lowered into the ground (CT, 314; 218). Again, however, any self-aggrandizement is undercut by one crucial detail: the horrific murder having left little of Houellebecq’s body intact, the funeral directors opt to put his remains in a child’s coffin. The effect, we are told, is ‘absolument navrant’ (‘absolutely awful’ (CT, 312; 216)).

It has become quite common, in recent decades, for authors in French literature to write about themselves in a genre that has been dubbed ‘autofiction’ and popularised by the likes of Serge Doubrovsky (who coined the term) and Christine Angot. But La Carte et le territoire does not really belong to this trend in any very clear sense. Autofiction, as defined by Doubrovsky, has three notable characteristics: a literary style of writing (i.e., to distinguish it from simple autobiography or memoirs); the complete identification of author, narrator and hero; and a tendency for the narrative to constitute or contain a process of self-(psycho)analysis. It is necessarily the case that autofictions are generally written in the first person. Now La Carte et le territoire clearly does not meet these criteria, since it is written in the third person with an omniscient narrator and the novel’s principal protagonist is not Houellebecq but Jed, with Houellebecq appearing instead as a secondary character in the fiction. For Philippe Gasparini, part of the distinctiveness, and the pleasure, of the autofiction lies in the ambiguous blending of believability and unbelievability. The reader will recognise many aspects of the hero’s life as belonging truthfully to the author but may doubt whether all the events in the book really took place. The author’s life is thus fictionalised, and part of the fun of reading the
book is trying to guess which elements are real and which exaggerated or distorted. Again, however, this does not really apply to Houellebecq’s novel. Yes, the portrait of Houellebecq is recognisable, and other figures in the novel have an attested existence in the real world (Beigbeder, Pernaut, Bellemare, etc.). But the novel’s central intrigue, involving Jed’s portrait of Houellebecq, is obviously pure invention, since Jed Martin does not correspond to any living artist. And Houellebecq’s bloody murder cannot possibly be real, if only because he could not, then, have finished writing his book. In short, with La Carte et le territoire, Houellebecq seems to flirt with the fashion for autofiction, yet finds a form that is more ludic still, because it offers greater fictional licence. That said, Houellebecq doubtless shares some of the motivations that Gasparini sees in the turn towards autofiction. He suggests that authors often choose to project themselves into a fictional character because this dissimulation offers a kind of protection (both personal and legal) compared to the exposed confession of autobiography. Writers may also favour a novelisation of their lives because it is assumed to have greater literary merit than straightforward autobiography, or because – precisely by being indirect or evasive – it represents a more honest attempt to grapple with the difficulty of self-knowledge, amply attested by modern psychology.

This latter concern can also be seen to motivate another form of self-writing identified by Michel Beaujour as the literary self-portrait. Given the fascination with, and knowingness about, portraiture in La Carte et le territoire, we might be tempted to ascribe Houellebecq’s novel to this genre. But, again, the reality by no means matches the description. For Beaujour, the literary self-portrait avoids chronological narrative and is instead organised logically and thematically, its construction proceeding as a kind of associative montage. Precursors of this genre include Montaigne’s essays and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Rêveries du promeneur solitaire, while more recent examples would be the work of Michel Leiris or Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes (1975). Again, however, the self-portrait as described by Beaujour has at least one characteristic that is resonant with Houellebecq’s novel. The self-portrait, Beaujour states, is closely bound up with, and tends to grow out of, ‘la retraite, l’oisiveté, le retrait’ (‘retirement, idleness, withdrawal’). This, at least, accords quite closely with the image of Houellebecq that we gain from La Carte et le territoire: the reclusive writer voluntarily cut off from society in Ireland or in the French countryside, free from financial concerns thanks to his earlier success and with nothing but time on his
hands. In being thus cut off from the real world, the literary self-portrait has a tendency to develop visions of Utopia and if this is perhaps not noticeably true of La Carte et le territoire it is nonetheless a characteristic that we associate with Houellebecq (and that will be examined in detail in Chapter 3, below). At the same time, though, by growing out of idleness, the self-portrait is a guilty kind of writing since it comes across as useless and self-indulgent in a culture in which language is routinely instrumentalised, by politics, education and the media. The self-portrait thus becomes a kind of confession, not necessarily of a crime, but of its own uselessness. One senses, at times in La Carte et le territoire, this kind of guilt on Houellebecq’s part: it comes across in his extreme withdrawal from the world, his refusal to adopt a lifestyle befitting his celebrity status, as though sensing his very existence were an unreasonable burden on the world. In places, however, there is also a sense that Houellebecq is parodying the tradition of guilt and confession in literary self-portraits, for instance in his comically agonised discourse over pork products. When Jed first visits him, Houellebecq asserts soberly that he has given up eating pork since he considers it immoral to slaughter animals as sensitive and intelligent as pigs (CT, 135; 89). But when Jed returns a few months later, he finds Houellebecq’s kitchen full of dried sausages and pâté: ‘J’ai complètement replongé’, cries the writer in despair (CT, 162; 107).

In short, though, La Carte et le territoire belongs to none of these genres of self-writing; quite simply, Michel Houellebecq appears as a character in his own novel. However, this is not the first time that Houellebecq has enjoyed a fictional existence between the pages of a book. Given the frequency with which French novels refer to the narrow community of the Parisian publishing set, it is hardly surprising that Houellebecq has featured in some of these works in more or less disguised form. For instance, Philippe Djian’s Vers chez les blancs (2000) is a tale of professional and sexual intrigue set in precisely this milieu that seems to refer to Houellebecq. One writer in the story, Patrick Vandhoeren, becomes the target of jealousy due to his enormous success and his uncommon talent for writing sex scenes. He is more specifically linked to Houellebecq by vague references to his ‘théorie sur la misère sexuelle’ (‘theory of sexual poverty’). But the similarities to Houellebecq end there, since Patrick Vandhoeren is presented as a confident, energetic, masculine character, even proving to be an aggressive soccer player—hardly qualities associated with the author of Extension du domaine de la lutte.
A more extensive and accurate portrait of Houellebecq is to be found in Pierre Mérot’s *Arkansas* (2008). Partly inspired by the narrative of *La Possibilité d’une île*, and by the media frenzy that accompanied the publication of that novel (described in the introduction to this volume), *Arkansas* features a central character with the unremarkable name of François Court who adopts the more intriguing sobriquet of Kurtz, with explicit reference to Joseph Conrad and *Apocalypse Now*. Like Houellebecq, Kurtz was born on the island of Réunion, where his hippie mother still lives, though he lies about his date of birth. He found global success with his first three novels – *Entreprises*, *Clonages* and *Tourismes* – and critics began to compare him to Balzac. He also shares Houellebecq’s tastes and mannerisms: his constant exhaustion and distraction, his idiosyncratic way of holding a cigarette, his wardrobe acquired from Monoprix, his enthusiasm for holidays in Thailand and his claims to value poetry over the novel. Having made his fortune, he moves to Spain. Kurtz, it is said, cut all his ties as he rose to fame, publicly betraying his former friends as he oversaw his own rebirth, seemingly wanting to be as famous as Michael Jackson or Madonna. There is clearly some bitterness in Mérot’s portrait of Houellebecq. A comic writer of a similar age to his more famous rival, Mérot’s novels explore comparable territory of depressed, isolated single men whose lives are marked principally by alcohol and sexual misadventure, yet Mérot has had none of Houellebecq’s international success. He accuses Houellebecq’s novels of giving off ‘l’impression générale d’une médiocrité enrobée, d’une facilité inaboutie, d’une esthétique du mépris’. Claiming that the media are more interested in people than in books, Mérot writes that Kurtz/Houellebecq ‘a donc écrit de mauvais livres pour qu’on s’intéresse à lui’. If Mérot is at risk of appearing simply jealous, however, he is lucid enough to see the difference between himself and Houellebecq: ‘Contrairement à ce qu’on pense, il est allé vers ses semblables. Il a regardé le monde […] Il s’est mêlé à la foule alors que je grommelle dans mon coin’. As though to demonstrate his point, *Arkansas* includes several parodies of Houellebecq’s style – his eulogies of cheap consumer goods, his detached scientific descriptions of natural phenomena, his casual pornography – but without ever attaining the universal significance of Houellebecq’s best writing. In the latter part of the novel, Kurtz acquires a large ranch (named ‘Arkansas’) in Spain where he tries to set up a utopian community that rapidly comes to resemble more closely a resurrection cult from whose faithful Kurtz extorts large sums of money. The ranch also serves as a glorified
harem with a dozen or so nude teenagers offering sexual favours to the members. Eventually, Kurtz, driven crazy by alcohol, self-delusion and, possibly, a brain tumour, tortures and murders his followers before setting fire to his property with him inside it. If this constitutes something like a revenge fantasy for Mérot, he is careful not to align himself too closely with any one perspective in the novel. *Arkansas* is partly narrated by an ageing writer named Traum, a former friend of Houellebecq who ultimately becomes a witness, and accessory, to his death. It is initially tempting to see a close correspondence between Traum and Mérot (they both share a five-letter name with the same three consonants in reverse order plus two vowels), yet the narrative comes increasingly under the influence of a first-person narrator who acts as Traum’s secretary and gradually sows the suspicion that Traum himself may be sick, drunk or delirious...

Arguably, though, a very similar way of refracting a self-portrait through different characters is to be found in *La Carte et le territoire*. Because, in addition to the character who bears his own name, Houellebecq seemingly pours a lot of himself into the protagonist Jed Martin. Indeed, if it were not for the presence of ‘Michel Houellebecq’, commentators would doubtless have seized upon Jed as another in the long line of Houellebecq surrogates serving as narrators and protagonists to Houellebecq’s novels. Let us consider the evidence: Jed is a solitary, unsocialised individual. We learn that he was a lonely, studious boy, isolated from his schoolmates by his unusual interest in classical literature and Catholic dogma (*CT*, 47–8; 26–7). As an adult, he is capable, when working on an artistic project, of not leaving his home for six months at a time, other than to visit the supermarket (*CT*, 60; 35). In his later years, this lifestyle is prolonged over years if not decades, since we are told that he worked for ‘the last thirty years of his life’ on his final video works (*CT*, 406; 286), rarely leaving his large, private estate. In short, like Houellebecq as depicted in the novel, Jed maintains only the most minimal social relations: his only living relative is his father, whom he sees once a year at Christmas, until the latter’s death. He has no friends to speak of, and only a couple of notable relationships, including the one – which Jed himself seems to find thoroughly improbable – with Olga. In addition, Jed shares Houellebecq’s tastes in food (cannelloni eaten straight from the tin (*CT*, 28; 13)), television (*Questions pour un champion* (*CT*, 50; 28)) and literature (Agatha Christie (*CT*, 75; 45)). Like Houellebecq, Jed’s idea of Utopia would appear to be a kind of ‘total hypermarket’
In a final similarity to Houellebecq, however, all this social awkwardness is in a sense redeemed by the broad appeal and social significance of Jed’s art. Jed’s work, like Houellebecq’s, is described as coming out of ‘une réflexion froide, détachée sur l’état du monde’ (‘a cold, detached reflection on the state of the world’ (CT, 60; 35)). And, in the course of painting his many portraits, Jed comes to the conclusion, familiar from Houellebecq’s work, that ‘les gens se ressemblent beaucoup plus qu’on ne le dit habituellement’ (CT, 171; 113).

If Houellebecq represents himself in La Carte et le territoire, then, it is not in the sense implied by the title of Baudelaire’s autobiographical text Mon cœur mis à nu (‘My heart laid bare’). Houellebecq’s self-portrait is painfully honest in places, but comically exaggerated elsewhere; it shares elements of different genres of life-writing but remains stubbornly fictional; and the portrait is deceptively dispersed across more than one character. This elusiveness which Houellebecq seems to enjoy cultivating in La Carte et le territoire is also brought about by the style of the novel. In many ways, La Carte et le territoire is unlike the Houellebecq that readers have come to know and expect. The most striking difference from earlier works is the absence of sex. True, the character of Olga – stunningly beautiful, disconcertingly successful and inexplicably attracted to the rather gauche Jed – is very similar to Plateforme’s Valérie, and her lack of hesitation in abandoning the relationship to take up a promotion in Russia recalls Esther’s similarly casual dismissal of Daniel when she moves to New York in La Possibilité d’une île. But there is almost no description of actual sexual activity – Olga and Jed’s first sexual relations are discreetly elided – and very little noticeable sexual objectification of female characters. In general, Houellebecq seems more sympathetic and generous to his characters in La Carte et le territoire. When he first meets with success, Jed employs a press secretary, named Marilyn, who is cruelly described as ugly, neurotic and with a constant snuffle, ‘une petite chose souffreteuse, maigre et presque bossue’, and elsewhere ‘ce pauvre petit bout de femme, au vagin inexploré’ (CT, 76; 46). This portrait inevitably recalls the infamous Catherine Lechardoy in Extension du domaine de la lutte and ‘Ce trou qu’elle avait au bas du ventre [et] qui devait lui apparaître tellement inutile’ (EDL, 47; 44). However, and almost as though in direct response to criticisms of misogyny in Houellebecq’s work, when Jed meets Marilyn again for the ‘Métiers’ project, she has been transformed: better dressed and with a stylish haircut, Marilyn
has cured her constant sniffles, become more confident, and now chats openly about her busy sex life (CT, 151–2; 100). One sometimes has the impression, in other words, that Houellebecq’s writing has become more restrained with La Carte et le territoire. There is less sarcasm and there are fewer angry outbursts. There is perhaps more free indirect speech, and frequent use of that other favourite Flaubertian technique, the italics used with a gentle irony to designate received ideas: ‘Certes, il était plutôt joli garçon, mais dans un genre petit et mince pas tellement recherché en général par les femmes – l’image de la brute virile qui assure au pieu revenait en force depuis quelques années...’ (CT, 70; 42). Houellebecq’s future predictions are more restrained as well: rather than apocalyptic visions of the end of the human species, in La Carte et le territoire he paints a broadly optimistic portrait of France in the mid-twenty-first century, with the birth rate on the rise and educated, entrepreneurial citizens repopulating the countryside, at ease with high technology and making the most of France’s (almost exclusively) touristic economy (CT, 398–403; 281–4). Yet, among all this restraint and positivity, there are moments in the novel that seem like a self-parodic return to Houellebecq’s most well-trodden territory. The whole of chapter 4 of the novel’s first section reads like a digest of Houellebecq’s pet themes and stylistic tropes, containing sweeping generalisations (about Russians (CT, 69; 41)), distant anthropological description of human sexuality (CT, 70–1; 42), comical portraits of the Parisian celebrity milieu (complete with caricature of Beigbeder) (CT, 71–3; 42–3), the first, vicious characterisation of Marilyn, described above, and the improbable suggestion that Jed has never read a newspaper in his life (CT, 77; 47).

Representative of this shifting and sometimes disorienting approach in La Carte et le territoire, is the sudden switch, in the final third of the novel, to a crime narrative. We are plunged without warning into a narrative from the point of view of Inspector Jasselin which has all the hallmarks of the police procedual novel, right down to Jasselin’s ill-tempered grumblings about the forensic cops who have an overinflated budget but lack the stomach for real police work (CT, 275–6; 189–90). Jasselin is a thoroughly generic character, a hardened cop, close to retirement, who believes he has seen it all until confronted with the horrific scene of Houellebecq’s murder. Yet other elements of the characterisation of Jasselin are more specifically Houellebecqian. It is perhaps not unusual for a fictional detective to listen to classical music in his car in reflecting upon the case at hand, yet Houellebecq’s description
of Liszt’s late chamber music has a particularly languorous tone that betrays his singular voice:

Il n’y a peut-être aucune musique qui exprime, aussi bien que les derniers morceaux de musique de chambre composés par Franz Liszt, ce sentiment funèbre et doux du vieillard dont tous les amis sont déjà morts, dont la vie est essentiellement terminée, qui appartient en quelque sorte déjà au passé et qui sent à son tour la mort s’approcher, qui la voit comme une sœur, comme une amie, comme la promesse d’un retour à la maison natale.\(^{159}\)

\(\text{(CT, 283; 196)}\)

Similar in tone is the revelation that Jasselin copes with the stress of homicide cases by practising Asubhā, a technique of Buddhist meditation on the corpse, which he learned in Sri Lanka by staring at corpses and coming to accept them as his own destiny \(\text{(CT, 280–1; 193–4)}\). Equally Houellebecqian, if in a somewhat different vein, is the fact that Jasselin’s stoic masculinity is somewhat undermined by revelations of his sterility: it is not so much that Jasselin has a low sperm count, we are told, rather that he has no sperm at all \(\text{(CT, 286–7; 198)}\). Unable to have children, Jasselin and his partner instead dote on their dog, but again the choice of breed is far from macho: they favour the small, fluffy and extremely tame Bichon Bolognese. The murder case itself also seems to partake of Houellebecq’s gentle mocking of the crime genre. Initially, Houellebecq appears keen to join in the competition among thriller writers to imagine the most horrific of crimes: ‘Houellebecq’, the character’s house, is transformed into a kind of abattoir, his head and that of his dog, decapitated with a laser scalpel, are left on the armchairs, while the remains of their bodies are cut into thin strips, mingled, smeared over the walls and deposited in the fireplace \(\text{(CT, 277–8; 191–2)}\). However, as discussed above, the apparent ritual violence of the crime turns out to be a red herring, an attempt to distract attention from the real motive: the theft of a valuable work of art. It is almost tempting to see this dénouement as revenge for – or at least as a correction of – the violent excesses of Mérot’s \textit{Arkansas}. Houellebecq seems delighted to reveal that he is not nearly as interesting as Mérot makes out, and that the world is far more predictable and far less glamorous than the hysterical goings-on at the ‘Arkansas’ ranch. If ever he were to be killed, Houellebecq suggests, it would not be out of jealousy, artistic indignation or erotic obsession, but rather out of the most banal and depressing kind of material greed.

There are moments, in this third section, where \textit{La Carte et le territoire}
seems to revert to a kind of ‘Houellebecq-by-numbers’, as though the
risks of tackling an unfamiliar genre led the author to retreat to some of
his most tried-and-tested tropes. Such is the case when, as Jasselin reflects
that in order to withstand the spectacle of the murder scene he will need
to adopt the impassive perspective of a fly on the wall, Houellebecq tosses
out a quick encyclopaedic description of *Musca domestica* (*CT*, 265–6;
182–3). Or the dry, neutral passage in which he describes the duties of
a *commissaire de police* (*CT*, 269; 185). In fact, it was revealed, after
publication of the novel, that both these passages contained material
lifted directly from the French Wikipedia. Yet, alongside such lazy
copying and pasting, we find, in *La Carte et le territoire*, some of
Houellebecq’s very best writing: much of the third section of the novel
offers the jubilant spectacle of a writer at the height of his powers
thoroughly enjoying himself. One example would be the masterful
paragraph of skewed logic and comic precision which relates how Jasselin
became a cop: he had been interested in the law until his parents’ divorce
revealed to him ‘ce mélange de fourberie et de paresse à quoi se résume
le comportement professionnel d’un avocat’ (*CT*, 284; 196); this leads
into idle speculation as to why more divorcing couples do not resort to
homicide before reaching the comically simplistic conclusion that ‘La
peur du gendarme était décidément la vraie base de la société humaine’
(*CT*, 284; 197), which explains Jasselin’s choice of profession – QED!
Similarly exultant is the paragraph describing the species history of the
Bichon Bolognese (and concluding that its only *raison d’être* is to bring
joy and happiness to humans (*CT*, 289–90; 200)), which provides the
comic image of the dog accompanying Jasselin’s partner to her teaching
job at a university and providing adorable and ironic commentary on
her lectures about Keynes and Schumpeter (*CT*, 290; 201); before ending
with a consideration of the difficulties of travelling with pets that allows
Houellebecq to condemn airlines as ‘intrinsically fascist organisations’
(*CT*, 290; 201). A final example might be the paragraph of reflections
following the revelation that the dog’s testicles never dropped: far from
hindering the dog’s life, this asexuality actually makes him ‘plus soumis,
plus doux, plus joyeux et plus pur’ (*CT*, 293; 202). The paragraph reads
like a bathetic and self-mocking parody of Houellebecq’s science-fiction
narratives of asexual futures, and indeed leads to the familiar – in fact
comically overdetermined – conclusion that sexuality is ‘la source de tout
conflit, de tout massacre, de toute souffrance’ (*CT*, 293; 203).

In short, *La Carte et le territoire* contains some of the most facile
passages of Houellebecq’s work as well as some of the most original,
some of the most predictable and some of the most surprising. But, as with much of the earlier work, one of the most striking features of Houellebecq’s writing is the way in which it deflects criticism by pre-empting it: whenever you think you have pinned Houellebecq down, he pulls out an unexpected trump card; yet even in his most inspiring and inventive passages he can sometimes become a caricature of himself. It remains that self-criticism and self-sabotage are among Houellebecq’s most effective tools of self-defence. As François Raynaert remarked upon the novel’s publication, Houellebecq left little room for critics to manoeuvre: ‘qu’est-ce qui lui reste à dire, à la malheureuse [presse], si même les commentaires sur l’auteur sont déjà dans le bouquin?’ Or, as Nancy Huston put it, in a text that was published long before La Carte et le territoire, ‘l’autodétestation le protège efficacement, car personne ne peut le haïr autant que lui’.

Conclusion

Plateforme depicts a world that is governed, above all, by economic laws and in which people are defined by their professional status and their value in the labour market, a world where the pressure of capitalist competition appears all-consuming. In Plateforme, however, the proposed solution to the misery generated by this social organisation comes not from a radical rejection or overturning of this model, but rather from an appropriation of one of the solutions that capitalism itself offers for its internal contradictions: tourism, emblematic of the commodified leisure culture of a post-industrial age, is an eminently capitalist panacea for the stresses and disappointments of the working life, that promises relaxation through consumption while subjugating and exploiting another class of people who, because of uneven distribution of wealth throughout the world, have little choice but to serve the interests of the tourist class. Tourism, then, in Plateforme, is representative of the quantification of happiness that occurs in all of contemporary consumer culture, but is representative, too, of the attitude the developed world takes towards its developing neighbours, an attitude that is superficially ‘respectful’ but that, ultimately, serves only to maintain those cultures in a position of economic dependence. Houellebecq’s novel contains much acute satire on the ways in which tourist behaviour serves to shore up the social cohesion and class-identification of first-world travellers at the expense of their hosts. Houellebecq’s most controversial move
in *Plateforme* is therefore, in many ways, a logical one. Combining the lucrative market of tourism with the equally burgeoning field of the sex industry (already discussed at length in *Les Particules élémentaires*) gives sex tourism as a ‘natural’ economic outcome. In a capitalist consumer economy, alienated sexuality becomes a self-reinforcing problem, since the sexually unsatisfied are led to purchase sex in various forms thereby necessarily increasing its commodified status and further distancing the possibility of sex as a spontaneous expression of affection or desire. In a society in which capitalism has become thoroughly naturalised, Houellebecq suggests in *Plateforme*, mass prostitution can be seen as a logical consequence for sexuality. As with his earlier discussion of sexual malaise in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *Les Particules*, or his evocation of genetically modified futures in his science-fiction narratives, much of the controversy of Houellebecq’s idea comes from the apparently cold, posthumanist stance adopted in explaining it: sex tourism is presented not as a shameful violation of the human rights of thousands of individual Thai women but rather as a structural necessity responding to a sexual–economic deadlock in the west and a disparity of supply and demand between the developed and developing worlds. Notwithstanding this problematic tone, however, our analysis has suggested that Houellebecq actually shares many of the conclusions of scholars and activists engaged with the question of sex tourism, even if there is sometimes a troublingly neocolonialist attitude to some of his accounts of the sex tourist encounter. Still, it would be hasty to accuse Houellebecq of racism, and this chapter has sought to disentangle the ‘ethnic’ controversy of *Plateforme*, suggesting that it came about through a conflation of several different, ostensibly unrelated, strands of the novel. Admittedly, there is some stereotyping in *Plateforme* but, as always with Houellebecq, the attribution of authorial intention behind these comments remains difficult, which means that any critical response to the novel is beset by pitfalls.

*La Carte et le territoire* extends many of the concerns of *Plateforme*, and especially its preoccupation with globalisation, by depicting the economic decline of France and its dwindling cultural significance on the world stage. In the novel, traditional French culture has become the object of commodified nostalgia, a ‘hyperreal’ Frenchness created to be sold to foreign tourists. As such, the novel constitutes an extended reflection on the disappearance or alienation of traditional forms of labour. If it sometimes seems nostalgic for this traditional work, and nostalgic, too, for a romantic conception of art and artists, the novel
elsewhere shows clearly how the art world ascribes monetary value to individuals just as much as the worlds of work and sex that came in for criticism in earlier novels. Michel Houellebecq’s self-portrait in La Carte et le territoire seems designed precisely as a way of avoiding this reification of the artist since it proves so very difficult to pin down, by turns self-aggrandising and self-deprecating and always refracted through different perspectives, just as the narration of La Carte et le territoire often seems to promise familiar territories or tropes only to take unexpected new turns.