Michel Houellebecq

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This chapter seeks to reconstruct the understanding of ‘life’, and human life in particular, that characterises Houellebecq’s work and that, in *La Possibilité d’une île* (2005), is finally seen to necessitate humanity’s overcoming by a posthuman successor species. In doing so the chapter returns to Houellebecq’s earliest works and notes Houellebecq’s apparent identification with H. P. Lovecraft, the American author of horror fiction whose writing is marked by a hatred of life and for whom literature appears as a rejection of or opposition to life. This sense is confirmed in *Rester vivant* (1991), which stresses failure and suffering as the poet’s vocation. Significant, too, is Houellebecq’s repeated appeal to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer who equally describes life as a domain of struggle, suffering and disappointment for which the only possible solution is a suppression or rejection of individual will. *La Possibilité d’une île* also stresses the disappointment of life, especially in the context of a hedonistic culture that devalues maturity and dismisses the elderly, thereby leading to an increasing restriction of the viable life course. This view of life tends to imply a somewhat old-fashioned and simplistic social Darwinism, yet the future Utopia of *La Possibilité d’une île*, in which humanity engineers its own overcoming, suggests a far more complex and paradoxical view of evolution and the novel can be seen as an attempt to think the unthinkable; that is to say, what kind of shape would be taken by the life of a future species for which our own systems of value and modes of understanding the world had ceased to be meaningful? Finally, this chapter closes on an interrogation of the ambiguous role of religion in Houellebecq’s work. His novels contain reasonably extensive reference to religious ideas, traditions and practices, yet are couched in an uncertain, shifting tone that often makes these markers of faith appear incongruous or ironic. Nonetheless there is fairly clear evidence of some residual respect in Houellebecq’s work for
religious faith or commitment and a sense of the persistence of religious models over our thinking and behaviour. This can be seen, too, in his treatment of religious cults which is gently ironic but never entirely facetious or condemnatory. Religious discourse remains valuable in two domains especially: it continues to allow for a belief in selfless love in a culture where this value has been largely replaced by narcissistic eroticism; and it helps us to think through the moral implications of the scientifically facilitated elongation or replication of life that may shortly be within our grasp. Lastly, religious thought remains one of the few domains in our society that points to the benefits to be accrued from a renouncing of desire, something that has become anathema to the ruling ideology of consumer democracy.

Life: Houellebecq, Lovecraft, Schopenhauere

Michel Houellebecq’s first published work (in 1991) was his short, and relatively little-discussed, study of the American horror writer H. P. Lovecraft. If the work has drawn scant commentary, it is doubtless because readers are uncertain how it fits alongside Houellebecq’s novels and poems, with their fairly coherent thematic continuity; and also because the work itself is something of a strange beast – not really a biography and a little too impressionistic to be taken seriously as literary criticism.¹ Houellebecq himself, in a new preface written for the work in 1998, following the success of Les Particules élémentaires, admitted: ‘Avec le recul, il me semble que j’ai écrit ce livre comme une sorte de premier roman. Un roman à un seul personnage’ (HPL, 6; 23).² But, if Houellebecq’s H. P. Lovecraft is a study of one writer by another, part of its strangeness perhaps stems from Houellebecq’s intuition that ‘Il y a quelque chose de pas vraiment littéraire chez Lovecraft’ (HPL, 22; 34).³ And it is perhaps in this quality that Houellebecq finds a point of identification with the American author: for, although Houellebecq’s popular success means that he has found a recognised place within the literary establishment during his own lifetime in a way that Lovecraft never did, Houellebecq’s work is still sometimes regarded with a degree of snobbery and suspicion. There has been – as Dominique Noguez first pointed out, and as we saw in Chapter 1 – a reluctance to discuss in any detail Houellebecq’s style out of a prurient preference for his incendiary material, just as the lurid horrors of Lovecraft’s stories long sealed his reputation over the remarkable baroque structures of his writing.
Houellebecq summarises this point in a neat formula that might apply to himself as well as it does to Lovecraft: there is a suspicion that ‘Chez lui, la haine de la vie préexiste à toute littérature’ (HPL, 54; 57). Houellebecq and Lovecraft are fundamentally dissimilar in one crucial respect, however, which Houellebecq himself recognises: Lovecraft never so much as mentions either sex or money, the two factors which, since Extension du domaine de la lutte, Houellebecq has established as the twin poles of his analysis of our social malaise. As a rather traditional, and also somewhat reclusive, New England gentleman, Lovecraft considered such matters to be unworthy of his consideration such that, as Houellebecq remarks, he would have struggled to survive in our era, in which ‘La valeur d’un être humain se mesure […] par son efficacité économique et son potentiel érotique: soit, très exactement, les deux choses que Lovecraft détestait le plus fort’ (HPL, 144; 116). Various critics have suggested that we could see a kind of sexual terror underpinning Lovecraft’s imagery of viscous, tentacular creatures, but Houellebecq suggests that we are wrong to psychoanalyse Lovecraft’s tales, which are, on the contrary, based on what he calls a ‘matérialisme absolu’ (‘absolute materialism’ (HPL, 6; 24)). Lovecraft’s creatures are not ghosts or hallucinations, but should be taken as really existing in the material world, albeit sometimes on planes or in dimensions inaccessible to human perception. As Houellebecq comments, ‘Aucun fantastique n’est moins psychologique, moins discutable’ (HPL, 39; 46). If Lovecraft is able to achieve this disconcerting impression of realism in tales of supernatural horror, it is largely because of his regular appeal to a scientific language. Houellebecq admires his ‘systematic use of scientific terms and concepts’ (HPL, 8; 24) and this is perhaps a significant point of comparison between the two writers. For Houellebecq relies heavily upon the language of molecular biology and quantum mechanics in Les Particules élémentaires, as well as on discourses of evolution in La Possibilité d’une île – as we will see below – both to offer rational explanations for his characters’ behaviour in the short term, and, on a grander scale, to justify his visions of seemingly improbable future mutations. In Houellebecq’s words, ‘l’utilisation du vocabulaire scientifique peut constituer un extraordinaire stimulant pour l’imagination poétique’ (HPL, 83; 74). Lovecraft’s characters, notes Houellebecq, have no psychological depth, but effectively take on the status simply of observers of the unfolding abominations: ‘Leur seule fonction réelle, en effet, est de percevoir’ (HPL, 75; 68). It would be an exaggeration to say the same of Houellebecq’s narrators and protagonists,
who, after all, have a significant interior life and an active role in the events of the narrative. Nonetheless, as we saw in Chapter 1, several of the male characters in Houellebecq’s fiction, including the narrator of Extension, Michel Djerzinski, and, at times, Bruno – as a function of their effective exclusion from the sexual economy – are cast in the role of impotent observers of a system whose rules of operation they dispassionately adumbrate, while being unable to penetrate it. Houellebecq notes that, in Lovecraft, the most unspeakable horrors are always precisely dated and situated (the author often providing coordinates in degrees of longitude and latitude for more exotic locations), this subtle construction of a realistic topos ultimately serving no other goal than to ‘préparer les passages d’explosion stylistique’ (HPL, 103; 88) in which Lovecraft drops his reserve and gives vent to the most unpleasant contents of his imagination. Arguably, Houellebecq’s style achieves a similar effect when his scientific vocabulary, the dry tone of sociological documentation, the inclusion of low-end brand names and all the bathetic familiarity of his fictional worlds give way to full-throated rants and the most socially unacceptable outpouring of sexist, racist and misanthropic sentiment.

For another point of comparison between Houellebecq and Lovecraft is that both writers have been identified as reactionaries. As Houellebecq says of the American, ‘il méprise l’argent, considère la démocratie comme une sottise et le progrès comme une illusion’ (HPL, 28; 39). There is surely a degree of identification with these qualities on Houellebecq’s part, which would account for what Frédéric Sayer sees as the ‘compromising enthusiasm’ with which they are discussed in H. P. Lovecraft. Lovecraft was also, was especially, a racist, and Houellebecq describes the way in which his ignorant, old-fashioned sense of racial superiority mutated, following direct contact with the poor, multiracial neighbourhoods of New York City, into a brutal, paranoid, phobic hatred. In his correspondence, Lovecraft described the immigrants of the Lower East Side in the same terms of a slimy, amorphous substance that he reserves for the monsters of his fictions. What has sometimes been rather hastily labelled as Houellebecq’s own racism rarely seems to proceed from this kind of deep-seated psychological insecurity; instead, it can more often be attributed to a deliberate provocation – as in Plateforme – or to an unthinking, and unformulated, nostalgia for white male privilege in an age where the criteria of social value have shifted ground, with traditional codes of honour and dignity, manners and learning, having been largely replaced in the public sphere.
by physical fitness, sex appeal and self-confident presentation. But a degree of sympathy is nonetheless perceptible when Houellebecq describes Lovecraft’s horrified incomprehension of African-American culture. If Lovecraft hates negroes, says Houellebecq, it is because ‘Leur vitalité, leur apparente absence de complexes et d’inhibitions le terrifient et le dégoûtent. Ils dansent dans la rue, ils écoutent des musiques rythmées … Ils parlent fort. Ils rient en public. La vie semble les amuser; ce qui est inquiétant. Car la vie, c’est le mal’ (HPL, 142; 113). This is, ultimately, Houellebecq’s excuse for Lovecraft’s racism – that it is a kind of occupational hazard: ‘Les écrivains fantastiques sont en général des réactionnaires, tout simplement parce qu’ils sont particulièrement, on pourrait dire professionnellement, conscients de l’existence du Mal’ (HPL, 144–5; 116).

This is the key to Houellebecq’s reading of Lovecraft – this idea that ‘la vie, c’est le mal’. After all, let us not forget the all-important subtitle of the book: Contre le monde, contre la vie (Against the world, against life). This is where Houellebecq finds his strongest bond with the American horror writer. Because, in Houellebecq’s interpretation, Lovecraft’s world view can be reduced to a simple affirmation: ‘l’univers est une chose franchement dégoûtante’ (HPL, 74; 67). For all his appeal to science as a way of anchoring his fictions in the real world, Lovecraft ultimately rejects literary realism in favour of the fantastic, and the reason, according to Houellebecq, is that ‘La vie est douloureuse et décevante […] Sur la réalité en général, nous savons déjà à quoi nous en tenir; et nous n’avons guère envie d’en apprendre davantage’ (HPL, 13; 29). We might compare Houellebecq’s own proclivity for imagining utopian futures, out of a firm belief that nothing more is to be obtained from this world. In a key paragraph of H. P. Lovecraft, we can witness Houellebecq already developing the language that will make him famous with Les Particules élémentaires: the sense of life as an arbitrary and meaningless convergence of dull matter in which all human actions and aspirations are vain and absurdly deluded as to their capacity to change the tedious facts of the universe:

Peu d’êtres auront été à ce point imprégnés, transpercés jusqu’aux os par le néant absolu de toute aspiration humaine. L’univers n’est qu’un furtif arrangement de particules élémentaires. Une figure de transition vers le chaos. Qui finira par l’emporter. La race humaine disparaîtra. D’autres races apparaîtront, et disparaîtront à leur tour. Les cieux seront glaciaux et vides, traversés par la faible lumière d’étoiles à demi mortes. Qui, elles aussi, disparaîtront. Tout disparaîtra. Et les actions humaines sont
aussi libres et dénuées de sens que les libres mouvements des particules élémentaires. Le bien, le mal, la morale, les sentiments? Pures ‘fictions victoriennes’. Seul l’égoïsme existe. Froid, inentamé et rayonnant.¹⁸ (HPL, 17–18; 32)

This dismal outlook gives rise to the fundamental thesis of Houellebecq’s book on Lovecraft, which appears to be as much a comment on his own work as it is on that of the American: that literature, in all senses, is to be understood as opposed to life. As Houellebecq writes: ‘Quand on aime la vie, on ne lit pas. On ne va guère au cinéma non plus, d’ailleurs. Quoi qu’on en dise, l’accès à l’univers artistique est plus ou moins réservé à ceux qui en ont un peu marre’ (HPL, 14; 30).¹⁹ As such, Lovecraft’s work could be most usefully recommended to those who feel a certain aversion to life. Lovecraft, concludes Houellebecq, fulfilled the highest mission of literature: ‘Offrir une alternative à la vie sous toutes ses formes, constituer une opposition permanente, un recours permanent à la vie’ (HPL, 150; 119).²⁰ But, in thus succeeding, literature is also, somewhat paradoxically, opposed to death, since it comes to represent, for the writer, the only alternative to suicide. Houellebecq delights in pointing out that Lovecraft wrote, for several years, with a bottle of cyanide within reach.

All of these themes – the hatred of life, the opposition between life and literature, and the role of writing in preserving from suicide – are thus set out in H. P. Lovecraft, Houellebecq’s first published work, prior to receiving their most programmatic expression in Houellebecq’s ‘Method’ Rester vivant, also first published in 1991. Here too, Houellebecq argues that the poet must cultivate ‘un profond ressentiment à l’égard de la vie’, which is ‘nécessaire à toute création artistique véritable’ (RV, 11).²¹ Writing, again, is opposed to life, to the extent that ‘Apprendre à devenir poète, c’est désapprendre à vivre’ (RV, 11).²² For to choose literature is to choose truth and ‘Vous ne pouvez aimer la vérité et le monde’ (RV, 27).²³ Instead, the writer is a kind of parasite on society, but ‘un parasite sacré’ (‘a sacred parasite’ (RV, 20)). Too much suffering will prevent you from writing, says Houellebecq, yet suffering is fundamental, is primary in the vocation of the writer, writing appearing as an extension of the scream or inarticulate cry: ‘La poésie, en réalité, précède de peu le langage articulé’ (RV, 15).²⁴ Yet Houellebecq also stresses that a constant effort is required to wrestle this primal suffering into a linguistic and artistic structure because, as we saw in Chapter 1, ‘La structure est le seul moyen d’échapper au suicide’ (RV, 15).²⁵ Which is essential since, as the title of this ‘method’ makes clear, a writer can only write so
long as he stays alive: ‘Un poète mort n’écrit plus. D’où l’importance de rester vivant’ (RV, 19). In all other respects, however, the writer is doomed to failure – ‘le bonheur n’est pas pour vous; cela est décidé, et depuis fort longtemps’ (RV, 16) – just as H. P. Lovecraft, who did not even succeed in staying alive beyond the age of forty-six, was ‘pénétré jusqu’à la moelle de son échec, de sa prédisposition entière, naturelle et fondamentale, à l’échec’ (HPL, 136; 109).

One of the few critics to pay close attention to H. P. Lovecraft and Rester vivant is the novelist Nancy Huston who includes a chapter on Houellebecq in her book Professeurs de désespoir and singles out for criticism precisely this focus on suffering, failure and despair. Huston argues that what Houellebecq in Rester vivant calls ‘the subjects no one wants to hear about’ – his unholy trinity of ‘la maladie, l’agonie, la laideur’ (‘sickness, ugliness, pain’) (RV, 26) – in fact represent ‘les sujets de prédilection du courant le plus puissant de la littérature contemporaine en Europe’. Huston traces a lineage of this literature of despair in twentieth-century Europe (Beckett, Cioran, Kundera, Thomas Bernhard) and identifies other contemporary authors, such as Christine Angot, who share this nihilistic outlook. Huston is highly critical of this tendency in literature, accusing these authors of being elitist and solipsistic, worse, of being stuck in a perennially adolescent mindset characterised by thoughtlessness, arrogance and ingratitude. All readers of Michel Houellebecq have doubtless shared Huston’s exasperation on occasion, and her deflating of the author’s egotism is at times welcome, well-observed and amusing. We should be wary, however, of espousing too closely Huston’s point of view. She may well be right when she identifies misogyny as an inevitable corollary of this literary nihilism: all the authors in her corpus are misogynists, claims Huston, because they hate physical existence and they hold women (and specifically women’s sexuality) responsible for it. But, if these authors’ attribution of blame to women is always spurious, Huston’s argument is itself undermined by its essentialising moves. All of these writers of despair, Huston points out, were childless, or at least, as in the case of Houellebecq, estranged from their children. It is the lack of time spent in the company of young children – and hence their limited appreciation of the capacity for growth, change and renewal – that explains, according to Huston, these authors’ bleak and irredeemable outlook on the passage of time, on mortality and on death itself. Huston complains at the way the childless have ‘monopolised’ literary discourse in Europe. But there is a suspiciously heteronormative flavour to this argument,
a paranoid sense that celibates and queers are running the world, that
fails to recognise the extent to which the promotion of the monogamous
couple and the family unit remains an officially sanctioned discourse,
against which the literature of nihilism derided by Huston can be read
as a discourse of contestation. Huston is doubtless right to identify
the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer as the grandfather, or
godfather, of this nihilist strain in European thought and literature, but
her argument ultimately fails to rise above the banal conclusion that ‘il
manquait d’amis; il manquait d’amour!’. This is precisely the kind of
patronising dismissal of the depressed and loveless that Houellebecq
satirised in Extension du domaine de la lutte and that, in our first
chapter, we sought to move beyond. This kind of condescending remark
is inadequate because it dispenses with the need to ask why – that is, for
what reasons tied to the socio-economic structure of our communities –
certain individuals find themselves living without friends, without
sex, without love. Whatever the considerable faults of both authors, we
should take seriously Houellebecq’s engagement with Schopenhauer if
we are to gain a fuller understanding of his diagnosis of our contem-
porary condition, and his proposed ‘solutions’.

Indeed, just the same kind of painful, unhappy material that is
discussed in Houellebecq’s writing about H. P. Lovecraft – misery,
failure, futility, horror – can also be found in Houellebecq’s appreciation
for Schopenhauer. Houellebecq has spoken frequently of his admiration
for Schopenhauer, and often quotes or paraphrases the philosopher in his
fictional works in support of his own views. In Plateforme, the narrator
borrows from Schopenhauer to bolster his assertion that our own past
is largely forgotten, meaningless and unimportant, all of which would
seem to belie our cherished belief in the singularity and irreplaceability
of every human life: ‘On se souvient de sa propre vie, écrit quelque part
Schopenhauer, un peu plus que d’un roman qu’on aurait lu par le passé’
(P, 175; 181). In La Possibilité d’une île, Schopenhauer is called upon to
confirm the grim evolutionary psychology underpinning the novel (and
which we will discuss in detail in the section below): ‘lorsque l’instinct
sexual est mort, écrit Schopenhauer, le véritable noyau de la vie est
consumé’ (PI, 217; 189). In his important essay ‘Approches du désarroi’,
Houellebecq pastiches the title of Schopenhauer’s magnum opus The
World as Will and Representation with the subheading ‘Le monde
comme supermarché et comme dérision’ (‘The world as supermarket
and derision’), but he does so in order to lament the degradation of
Schopenhauer’s concepts. Thus the sovereign will has been debased by
what Houellebecq calls ‘un éparpillement des désirs’ (‘a scattering of desires’), while representation has lost all innocence in the generalised rhetoric of advertising and publicity, constantly undermined by irony, sarcasm and self-reflexivity (l, 71–4/l2, 36–9/RV, 49–50).

For Schopenhauer, as for Houellebecq, life is struggle and life is suffering. Schopenhauer writes that ‘the life of the individual is a constant struggle, and not merely a metaphorical one against want or boredom, but also an actual struggle against other people’. Nor is any alternative to this suffering imaginable. Even in a Utopia, even one – such as might appeal to Houellebecq – ‘where lovers find one another without any delay and keep one another without any difficulty’, still ‘some men would die of boredom or hang themselves, some would fight and kill one another, and thus they would create for themselves more suffering than nature inflicts on them as it is’.

In the same way, in Houellebecq’s Rester vivant, suffering is the starting point and the point to which we (or Houellebecq, or the poet) must always return: ‘Le monde est une souffrance déployée’ (RV, 9), reads the first line of Rester vivant, followed a couple of pages later by: ‘souffrir, toujours souffrir’ (RV, 11) and ‘Et revenez toujours à la source, qui est la souffrance’ (RV, 11). In short, as Place-Vergnes suggests, ‘la souffrance est le concept fondateur de l’idéologie houellebecquienne, celui dont tout dérive’. For Schopenhauer, misfortune is never an exception or an accident in life: it is the rule. As one grows older, disappointment is inevitable with a life that ‘promised so much and performed so little’, a constant refrain in Houellebecq’s work and especially, as we shall see, in La Possibilité d’une île. But, if this vision of the world is unrelentingly bleak, it need not necessarily mean that the work itself is constantly depressing. Because, as Nietzsche pointed out with his customarily counter-intuitive insight, it is rarely depressing to read the calm and confident assertion of hard-won truths, however upsetting they may be: ‘The true thinker always cheers and refreshes,’ wrote Nietzsche, provided he expresses his truths ‘with certainty and simplicity, courage and strength’.

Schopenhauer believes that all one’s happiness, all one’s successes and pleasures in life are but a dull background against which the slightest pain or vexation takes centre stage in our consciousness; he theorises, in short, ‘the negativity of well-being and happiness, in antithesis to the positivity of pain’. We can certainly recognise this tendency in Houellebecq’s protagonists who, despite their objectively comfortable and gratifying positions within society – as scientist or civil servant, or even as a successful comedian in the case of Daniel in La
**Possibilité d’une île** – seem to focus unrelentingly on negative thoughts: their lacklustre sex lives, the meaninglessness of existence, the physical ailments of their ageing bodies, and the casual aggravations of other people. In Schopenhauer’s assessment, humanity’s needs are basically the same as those of other large animals – food, shelter and sex – yet human beings feel the burden of these needs all the more keenly because of our capacity for memory and anticipation. As a result, we fix upon objects which intensify our pleasure and our pain: drugs, luxuries, specific love objects, the opinion of others... Life becomes a struggle to achieve goals, but the attainment of those goals, instead of delivering us of the burden of need, creates a new burden that we experience as boredom. Schopenhauer writes:

> That human life must be some kind of mistake is sufficiently proved by the simple observation that man is a compound of needs which are hard to satisfy; that their satisfaction achieves nothing but a painless condition in which he is only given over to boredom; and that boredom is a direct proof that existence is in itself valueless, for boredom is nothing other than the sensation of the emptiness of existence. For if life, in the desire for which our essence and existence consists, possessed in itself a positive value and real content, there would be no such thing as boredom: mere existence would fulfil and satisfy us.\(^{44}\)

Thus, even if Houellebecq’s heroes achieved their apparently predominant aspiration of a lively and fulfilling sexual relationship with a nubile young woman, we can only presume that they would, in time, grow bored and frustrated with the arrangement. Houellebecq’s heroines, as we have seen, tend to be hastily dispatched in a cruel and improbable *deus ex machina*, but the reader can surely harbour few illusions that, say, Bruno and Christiane would live happily ever after, even without her sudden paralysis, given all that Houellebecq has written elsewhere about the eclipse of sentiment in the ageing couple. As Julian Young has commented in relation to Schopenhauer’s philosophy: ‘Paradoxically, the pain of satisfied willing is of *exactly the same nature* as the pain of unsatisfied willing’.\(^{45}\) Young has rightly pointed out that what Schopenhauer describes as boredom might more properly today be understood as depression (and we have seen the significance of the depressive discourse in Houellebecq’s writing, especially *Extension du domaine de la lutte*). Thus, for Schopenhauer, to will is to suffer, but the lack of will leads to boredom, which is also suffering. ‘When nothing engages one’s will it is not the case that one enters a state of will-lessness. The “pressure” of the will persists. In other words, though there is no
state of affairs in the world we will to achieve, we wish that there were such a state of affairs. We experience, in other words (to borrow a phrase from Heidegger), “the will to will”.

The will, in other words, cannot be extinguished. For Schopenhauer, the will itself is imperishable, but, because it operates within a finite world, its striving after individual goals is always in vain: ‘Time and that perishability of all things existing in time that time itself brings about is simply the form under which the will to live, which as thing in itself is imperishable, reveals to itself the vanity of its striving’. Schopenhauer identifies the will as what Kant called the thing-in-itself, that which exists independently of our perception. However, we, as individuals, are not the will as thing-in-itself, rather each of us is a phenomenon of the will and, as such, subject to the principle of sufficient reason which states that nothing happens without a definite reason why it should do so. It is our overlooking of this distinction that accounts for what Schopenhauer sees as the illusion of free will:

Hence we get the strange fact that everyone considers himself to be a priori quite free, even in his individual actions, and imagines he can at any moment enter upon a different way of life, which is equivalent to saying that he can become a different person. But a posteriori through experience, he finds to his astonishment that he is not free, but liable to necessity; that notwithstanding all his resolutions and reflections he does not change his conduct, and that from the beginning to the end of his life he must bear the same character that he himself condemns, and, as it were, must play to the end the part he has taken upon himself. Schopenhauer’s concept of will is therefore not to be confused with our prosaic sense of free will as desire; rather, Schopenhauer’s will is ‘the being-in-itself of every thing in the world [...] the sole kernel of every phenomenon’. As a manifestation of will, suggests Schopenhauer, human desire is no more to be privileged than such phenomena as water rushing downhill, or magnetic attraction, or electrical current. The reader of Houellebecq might here be reminded of the famous passage in Les Particules élémentaires in which the supposedly free actions of human beings – for instance, voters in a democracy – are compared to the turbulence of a river as it flows around the supporting pillar of a bridge. Such movements may be unpredictable, declares Houellebecq, but that does not justify our calling them free (PE, 227; 270). There is, in Schopenhauer’s analysis, and we might deduce also in Houellebecq’s, a distinction to be drawn between human beings, who demonstrate individual differences, and forces of nature, which operate according to
universal laws; but this does not imply that people act without predeter-
mination, only that a given stimulus will affect different individuals in
different ways. In fact, the will has no concern for individualities,
even though the individual may struggle to grasp this concept as she
can only experience the will through herself. The consequence of all
this, for Schopenhauer, is that we place far too much importance on
our individual existence and identity, failing to understand that they
are merely manifestations of the universal will to live. Our attachment
to our individuality is, at bottom, ‘childish and altogether ludicrous’.50

Finally, then, the only redemption we can hope to achieve from suffering
comes through denial of the will. The will as thing-in-itself can never
be countered, but individual desires, once they have been recognised
as transient, meaningless and necessarily leading to further suffering,
should be repudiated in order to minimise suffering. (Houellebecq’s
sympathy for this doctrine also explains his attraction to Buddhism,
which, as we shall see in the final section of this chapter, is mentioned
appreciatively on various occasions in his work. The proximity between
the central tenets of Schopenhauer’s philosophy and those of Buddhism
has been frequently noted, beginning with the philosopher himself.) In
particular, Schopenhauer stresses that sexual desire is ‘the quinte-
sence of this noble world’s imposture, since it promises so excessively much and
performs so miserably little’.51 And Walter Wagner has suggested that the
apparent nihilism of Houellebecq’s heroes demands to be understood, in
Schopenhauerian terms, as a negation of the will that is the cause of all
our suffering.52 Nietzsche, too, in his commentary on Schopenhauer in
the essay ‘Schopenhauer as Educator’, argues that, in focusing on the
satisfaction of our desires, we barely raise ourselves above the level of
the animal, since we ‘only desire […] more consciously what the animal
seeks through blind impulse’.53 It is only through the denial of the will
that we can begin to look upon the human, not as our given state, but
as a horizon of possibility, which, ‘in common with all nature, we are
pressing towards’.54 For Nietzsche, in other words, our humanity is an
unfinished project, and it is only by creating the conditions of emergence
for that which is best in the human that we may give evolution a helping
hand: ‘nature has done badly, [the young person] should say to himself;
but I will honour its great intentions by serving it so that one day it may
do better’.55 Let us now turn to La Possibilité d’une île and see how
Houellebecq creates a narrative to encapsulate precisely this argument:
that humanity’s suffering is the result of its focus on individual desire,
which makes us only superficially distinct from the brutal evolutionary
tussle that unites the other animals in strife; that this suffering can only be overcome through a rejection of individual desires, which would ultimately entail the relinquishing of individual identity itself and, thereby, a managed acceleration of the evolutionary process.

A cloned future: *La Possibilité d’une île*

As with so many of Houellebecq’s other books, *La Possibilité d’une île* can be read, in some ways, as a kind of disguised autobiography. Just as various critics have naively mistaken the narrators of Houellebecq’s previous novels for the author himself, and prior to Houellebecq’s mischievous self-portrait in *La Carte et le territoire*, the principal narrator and protagonist of *La Possibilité d’une île* seemingly invites readers to draw similar comparisons to the author. Following Houellebecq’s post-*Particules* success, the narrator of his latest novel is no longer the sluggish and depressive civil servant of earlier works, but has become a fêted public figure. Rather than a novelist, Daniel is a comedian, but his preferred material bears close resemblance to Houellebecq’s own cherished themes. Daniel first comes to public attention by satirising the conventions of tourism with a sketch set in the breakfast buffet of an all-inclusive holiday resort in Turkey (*PI*, 19–20; 11–12). Having achieved his success, however, Daniel rapidly runs out of ideas, all of his routines are variations on the theme of the disparities separating individuals in terms both of material wealth and sex appeal (*PI*, 21–2; 13). He becomes known for his ‘franchise tout à fait anormale’ (‘completely abnormal frankness’ (*PI*, 35; 26)), which gains him a reputation, much to his displeasure, as a humanist: ‘un humaniste grinçant, certes, mais un humaniste’ (*PI*, 22; 14). Later in the novel, Daniel turns his back on comedy and Aurélien Bellanger suggests that this, too, reflects Houellebecq’s own trajectory, his move away from facile humour in his more mature works (a tendency certainly born out in *La Carte et le territoire*). Daniel seems to consider himself essentially as an individual of mediocre talent who hit upon an idea that struck a nerve with the public. This sense emerges indirectly through a rather self-mocking comment upon Vladimir Nabakov: despite bad-mouthing the author’s style – which is said to resemble ‘une pâte feuilletée ratée’ (‘a collapsed pastry’ (*PI*, 31; 22)) – Daniel notes that the enduring fascination with *Lolita* (1955) would seem to suggest that Nabakov ‘est tombé sur quelque chose d’essentiel’ (‘stumbled upon something essential’ (*PI*, 31; 22)).
If this portrait of Daniel reads like a displaced commentary on Houellebecq’s own success, then the sense of self-reference is heightened by the fact that questions of autobiography are inserted meta-textually into the novel through the narrative’s split focalisation: chapters formed out of Daniel’s first-person narration alternate with shorter chapters voiced by clones of Daniel existing some time in the distant future and who comment upon the first Daniel’s account. Over the course of the novel, we learn how the conditions of this cloned future came about. In one of the first accounts of the clones, we are told that the goal of digitally encoding and storing personalities in order to download them into the neural circuits of cloned descendants was abandoned once a theoretician by the name of Pierce declared that personality could effectively be reduced to memory. As a result, the future clones share in their ancestor’s identity simply by reading and studying the written account of their life (PI, 27; 18). Much later it becomes clear that it was in fact Daniel’s own autobiography that provided the model for this transferral of identity and cultural memory to be adopted by the entire community of neo-humans (as they are known) (PI, 303; 267). This process thus provides the opportunity, within the novel, for a very brief commentary on the practice of life-writing, as voiced by the twenty-fourth clone of Daniel: ‘Concernant le récit de vie, il n’y a pas de consigne précise. Le début peut avoir lieu en n’importe quel point de la temporalité, de même que le premier regard peut se porter en n’importe quel point de l’espace d’un tableau; l’important est que, peu à peu, l’ensemble resurgisse’ (PI, 27; 18). This remark appears not only as comment upon La Possibilité d’une île as displaced autobiography, but also upon its novelistic structure, which proceeds in fragmentary and sometimes confusing fashion, only gradually building up to a portrait of the collapse of a civilisation and its replacement by another.

As elsewhere in Houellebecq’s work, the principal lesson to be learned from the account of Daniel’s life relates to the unrelenting disappointment of life and the pain of individual identity. The stress here, as in the previous novels, is above all on failure. Indeed, the cloned voice that speaks in a curiously apocalyptic tone in the novel’s prologue declares: ‘Le moi est la synthèse de nos échecs’ (PI, 15; 7).61 Daniel’s success as a comedian makes him rich but his life remains unremarkable: ‘J’habitais un trois pièces banal, dans le XIVe arrondissement, et je n’avais jamais couché avec une top model’ (PI, 30; 21).62 From his own perspective, Daniel’s life remains largely empty and meaningless. Despite his considerable wealth, he continues to do his own housework because ‘l'idée
qu’un être humain, si insignifiant soit-il, puisse contempler le détail de mon existence, et son vide, m’était devenue insupportable’ (PI, 133; 113–14).  

But Daniel’s gloomy frankness, even if it is expressed in the context of a comic routine, appears out of place in a society which places so much stress on enjoyment. As Isabelle comments: ‘ce que nous essayons de créer c’est une humanité factice, frivole, qui ne sera plus jamais accessible au sérieux ni à l’humour, qui vivra jusqu’à sa mort dans une quête de plus en plus désespérée du fun et du sexe; une génération de kids définitifs’ (PI, 36; 26). In such a culture, the expression of moral sentiments is unusual enough to catch an interlocutor’s attention but is unlikely to be taken seriously (PI, 211; 184), just as it is difficult to believe, in this radically atheistic society, that anyone can believe in God without a trace of irony (PI, 252; 221). This is, after all, the same society in which an unrepentant cannibal can claim to have shared an ‘intense religious experience’ with his victim, willingly recruited via the internet, while they tasted together the latter’s sectioned penis (PI, 308; 271). Notions such as good and evil are altogether irrelevant to this generation, as Daniel suggests when he observes Esther – the young actress with whom he has fallen in love – snorting cocaine and describes her as a ‘petit animal innocent, amoral, ni bon ni mauvais, simplement en quête de sa ration d’excitation et de plaisir’ (PI, 330; 291–2).  

Daniel cannot fit in with Esther and her young friends because, simply, ‘je n’avais pas le moins du monde la tête de quelqu’un avec qui on aurait pu envisager de s’amuser’ (PI, 310; 273).  

In short, with the typical hesitation between registers that we observed in our first chapter, Houellebecq in La Possibilité d’une île charts the stages of an irreversible decadence in this society, but he does so with so many shrugging understatements. Thus, Daniel announces nothing less than ‘le naufrage d’une civilisation’ (‘the shipwreck of a civilisation’), but remarks only that it is ‘sad’: ‘disons que c’est un peu triste; il y a des choses plus tristes, à l’évidence’ (PI, 343; 302–3).  

One clear manifestation of this self-centred and pleasure-seeking culture is the rejection of children. Daniel remarks upon the appearance of ‘child-free zones’, housing complexes in Florida to which children are simply forbidden access, in this society in which people are increasingly ready to admit that they just do not want ‘les tracas et les charges associés à l’élevage d’une progéniture’ (PI, 67; 54). The Elohimites, the religious sect whose experimentations sow the seeds of the neo-human future, are part of this movement against children, adopting the old anti-drugs slogan ‘Just say no’ with regard to procreation. The neo-humans, when
they arrive, will do away with childhood altogether, their clones being created as fully formed adults with the body of an eighteen-year-old, the whole process of embryogenesis – and, by implication, childhood development itself – regarded as unnecessary and dangerous, open to ‘deformations and errors’ (Pl, 236; 207). As so often in Houellebecq’s fiction, his narrator, Daniel, is as much a symptom of the process he is describing as he is its dispassionate analyst. Daniel himself has a son, but takes no interest in him whatever. He leaves his first wife shortly after she becomes pregnant and feels nothing when his son commits suicide. As we mentioned in Chapter 1, this affectless apprehension of Daniel’s son’s death rapidly became a famous and much-quoted example of Houellebecq’s style: ‘Le jour du suicide de mon fils, je me suis fait des œufs à la tomate’ (Pl, 28; 19); but the subsequent lines are no less shocking in their cold appraisal of the situation: ‘Je n’avais jamais aimé cet enfant: il était aussi bête que sa mère, et aussi méchant que son père. Sa disparition était loin d’être une catastrophe; des êtres humains de ce genre, on peut s’en passer’ (Pl, 28–9; 19). Much later in the novel, Daniel even has the gall to claim that his neglect of his son was the one heroic act of his life since he thereby spared both of them a bitter and strained relationship with the inevitable transmission of bad habits and neuroses from father to son: ‘j’avais refusé la chaîne, brisé le cercle illimité de la reproduction des souffrances, et tel était peut-être le seul geste noble, le seul acte de rébellion authentique dont je puisse me prévaloir à l’issue d’une vie médiocre’ (Pl, 385; 343).

One of the key insights of La Possibilité d’une île revolves around a structural aporia affecting the question of age in the decadent society in which the novel is set. This civilisation of fun prizes nothing so much as youth since it is based essentially around youthful activities (sports, popular music, drink and drugs, sex) and the values of beauty and sex appeal. But, since this civilisation also coincides with a falling birth rate, due to the self-centred rejection of children, it is also saddled with an ageing population so there is therefore an increasingly large section of society that is effectively excluded from this dominant ethos of fun. Houellebecq identifies a ‘fascination pure pour une jeunesse sans limites’ (Pl, 41; 31) in which more and more people of all ages are trying to act young, heedless of the ridicule to which they may be exposing themselves. But the actual window of possibility an individual enjoys in which to exploit to the full all the experience life has to offer is absurdly narrow (say, from around sixteen to twenty-two years of age). Only a handful of people have the confidence, the affluence and the physical
beauty required to make the most of these years, and those people will spend the rest of their lives jaded, having already seen and done it all (this is the case with Esther in *La Possibilité d’une île*). Everyone else, having missed their opportunity, will spend the rest of their lives wondering what it would have been like and harbouring resentments towards the people who would not then, or will not now, allow them to realise their full capacity for pleasure. In a throwaway line that recalls the Swiftian suggestions of *Plateforme*, Daniel even wonders why teenagers should not be forced into prostitution for the good of the (older) majority, ‘seul moyen pour eux de rembourser dans une faible mesure les efforts et fatigues immenses consentis pour leur bien-être’ (*PI*, 212; 185). Alas, the media focus on the eroticisation of ever younger bodies is accompanied by the hysterical persecution of paedophilia, the society of the spectacle rendering unthinkable, in one moment, the very pleasures it had promised a moment before. ‘Dans le monde moderne on pouvait être échangiste, bi, trans, zoophile, SM, mais il était interdit d’être vieux’ (*PI*, 209; 182). As he has done elsewhere, Houellebecq remarks, in *La Possibilité d’une île*, upon the inevitable decline in the sexual desire it is possible to feel for ageing bodies, noting that the eclipse of desire is swiftly followed by the disappearance of tenderness. The whole system is remarkable for its ruthlessness: ‘Jeunesse, beauté, force: les critères de l’amour physique sont exactement les mêmes que ceux du nazisme’ (*PI*, 72; 59). Indeed, later in the novel, the cruel neglect of those who have passed beyond the age of desirability will be described as a *holocaust*: ‘un pur et simple holocauste de chaque génération au profit de celle appelée à la remplacer, holocauste cruel, prolongé, et qui ne s’accompagnait d’aucune consolation, aucun réconfort, aucune compensation matérielle ni affective’ (*PI*, 385; 343). What is worse, it seems there is nothing older people can do about this situation, since rebellion, too, like sex, appears to be the exclusive preserve of the young (*PI*, 212; 184–5). With acidic irony, Houellebecq points out that those liberals who once – in the sixties and seventies – militated in favour of free love, without ever benefiting from it, are now the same ones who militate in favour of euthanasia or assisted suicide, without grasping the self-defeating logic that unites the two by simply consolidating the social status, power and privilege accorded to an increasingly narrow band of attractive youths. Daniel24 reports from the future that, in the years following Daniel1’s life, suicides, euphemistically renamed ‘departures’ became the rule for almost 100 per cent of human beings beyond a certain age, which, as a global average, was around sixty, but in the most developed nations
was as low as fifty (Pl, 89; 74). The Elohimites, and certain eastern cultures, even develop elaborate public ceremonies for these rituals of departure. Of course, the viciously ironic portrayal of the Dignitas clinic in La Carte et le territoire – culminating in the wish-fulfilment fantasy that sees Jed Martin beating up the manager of the organisation that profited from his father’s death – serves as further dour warning against the encroaching acceptance of euthanasia, which, in Houellebecq’s eyes, risks becoming an imposition rather than a choice.

For Houellebecq, it seems, this whole depressing situation – the ruthless sexual competition for access to nubile bodies and the equally unmerciful sidelining of the old – despite the particular characteristics it takes on in contemporary society, can be seen to stem ultimately from a deep atavistic heritage, and the frequent comparisons to other animals in Houellebecq’s work, pointed out in Chapter 1, serve to underline these aspects of human behaviour as so many evolutionary facts. Man’s sexual response to a woman’s touch continues to partake of ‘la domination du singe’, argues Houellebecq, ‘il serait stupide de l’ignorer’ (Pl, 94; 79). As a comedian, Daniel senses that, although he may successfully ridicule dated customs and practices such as ‘religiosity, sentimentalism, devotion, a sense of honour’ (Pl, 226; 198), even the most apparently absurd of our sexual habits are impervious to scorn since they derive from the ‘déterminants profonds, égoïstes, animaux de la conduite humaine’ (Pl, 227; 198). The deep roots of this heritage are made abundantly clear by observing the behaviour of the ‘savages’, the sorry remnants of the human race who have survived a long era of war, famine and environmental devastation and share the planet of the future with the cloned neo-humans though without any contact between the two species. The savages have regressed to a tribal hunter-gatherer lifestyle and the strict sexual hierarchy of their communities, in which only the strongest, fittest males have access to the females, is only superficially different from the sexual melee of our own late-human societies. Then, as now, the implication, in a society organised around the blind evolutionary pursuit of the perpetuation of the species, is that once a body has ceased to be sexually useful it is no longer worth preserving. Daniel observes ceremonies in which the two oldest members of a tribe of savages fight to the death until the weakest link is summarily dispatched. In our (slightly) more civilised societies, the older individuals destroy themselves rather than being destroyed by the community, but the principle remains the same. As Daniel morosely observes, sex is the only healthy, life-giving pleasure, and all others – rich food and drink, tobacco and other drugs
– are aimed only at accelerating self-destruction once sex is no longer available (PI, 383–4; 341). This rather oppressive view of evolution as the survival of the fittest that pertains in _La Possibilité d’une île_, as elsewhere in Houellebecq, is, as I have suggested before, a somewhat dated view that was already criticised by Nietzsche in the late nineteenth century for being caught up in the ideologies of Victorian population theory and sexual morality. As Keith Ansell Pearson comments, following Nietzsche, humanity has not been simplistically subjected to the laws of nature since prehistoric times, and any attempt to derive a ‘naturalistic ethics’ from these laws partakes of ‘extreme anthropomorphism’.

Such an ethics tends to lead to the reactionary assertion that social change is impossible as when Daniel admits that he always avoided politics because ‘la racine de tout mal était biologique, et indépendante d’aucune transformation sociale imaginable’ (PI, 155; 134). This kind of stance implies an altogether Lamarckian belief in moral heredity, a point of view which is lent a certain authority in the novel when it is placed in the mouth of the neo-human Daniel25: ‘il est naturel que ce soient les individus les plus brutaux et les plus cruels, ceux disposant du potentiel d’agressivité le plus élevé, qui survivent en plus grand nombre à une succession de conflits de longue durée, et transmettent leur caractère à leur descendance’ (PI, 466; 415).

But, importantly, this evolutionary pessimism is seemingly belied by the narrative development of _La Possibilité d’une île_ in which humanity renounces both its atavistic past and its future as a species and gives itself over to its posthuman, or neo-human, successor. As Daniel24 comments, the rapid decline of humanity ‘a toutes les apparences d’un suicide collectif’ (PI, 43; 33). Daniel25 adds that certain phenomena of late humanity, such as the environmentalist movement, were marked by a strange masochism, a certain ‘désir de l’humanité de se retourner contre elle-même, de mettre fin à une existence qu’elle sentait inadéquate’ (PI, 444; 396). I have remarked elsewhere upon how paradoxical this development appears in _La Possibilité d’une île_: that a species so preoccupied with the attainment of short-term pleasures, and furthermore that has been shown to be in thrall to an evolutionary logic aimed at preserving the species, should, of its own accord, decide to resign its tenure as master of the planet and plan its own succession in the form of a radically different species. It is not difficult to imagine how a more advanced species would supplant its ancestors through warfare, or the more efficient exploitation of resources; but it is completely unprecedented for a species consciously to invent its evolutionary successor
and then to submit to it. This would appear as a triumph of reason over desire, which, admittedly, is a possibility that has set humanity apart for millennia, but has tended to be less visible in the most fundamental domain of reproduction of the species.\textsuperscript{86} As Schopenhauer wrote:

If the act of procreation were neither the outcome of a desire nor accompanied by feelings of pleasure, but a matter to be decided on the basis of purely rational considerations, is it likely the human race would still exist? Would each of us not rather have felt so much pity for the coming generation as to prefer to spare it the burden of existence, or at least not wish to take it upon himself to impose that burden upon it in cold blood?\textsuperscript{87}

But, as Elizabeth Grosz has recently argued, we should be wary of assuming that Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection allows us to determine the future simply on the basis of past evidence. On the contrary, Darwin’s theory presents us with a complex new understanding of time in which the relatively short-term scale of reproduction and individual variation interacts with much longer-term developments in environmental and climatological conditions, the two scales modulating each other to determine species evolution. This makes it difficult to predict the emergence of new forms of life. As Grosz writes: ‘there is no other future, for Darwin, than that prefigured and made possible by but not contained in the terms of the present. The future brings what has been led up to but has never been defined by the past’.\textsuperscript{88} Besides, Nietzsche taught that the conservation of species was a ‘superfluous teleological principle’ and that the real goal of organisms was merely to discharge their force, with preservation simply a common consequence of this process.\textsuperscript{89} It would be possible, therefore, to account for the entirety of humanity’s imaginative and technological creations as a venting of its force and, although these feats of ingenuity have often improved rates of survival, they have also frequently given rise to mass destruction. At any rate, the question of the ‘usefulness’ of any adaptation, be it physical or technological, should not only be considered in the short-sighted terms of the here-and-now of the species but also, following Nietzsche, as ‘useful in a context yet to be determined, an untimely kind of utility, useful for those who do not yet exist or are yet to come, useful in unimaginable contexts’.\textsuperscript{90}

With the difficult question of how we get from here to there, from a decadent, self-centred humanity to a serene and wise neo-humanity, \textit{La Possibilité d’une île} raises the perhaps insoluble problem that Fredric
Jameson has seen at the heart of all utopian narratives, namely the dispute over whether Utopia requires a ‘radical transformation of subjectivity’ or whether, on the contrary, its conditions are ‘already grounded in human nature’, in the ‘needs and desires which the present has merely repressed and distorted’. And we should be in no doubt that *La Possibilité d’une île* is indeed a utopian narrative, in the sense that it imagines a different social organisation in response to the pain caused by various forms of inequality among human beings. The first step towards this Utopia, as is often the case, is what Jameson calls ‘the effacement of the private property of the self’. But there is more than one Utopia in *La Possibilité d’une île*. The first is represented by the religious sect of the Elohimites who, after all, form an alternative community based around different values and principles to mainstream society, and it is they who begin the experiments in human cloning that will eventually make possible the neo-humans of the future. The Elohimites practise healthy living, with careful diet and exercise routines, but the core of their utopian community is based around an ethos of sexual liberation familiar from the 1960s and 1970s and already satirised at length by Houellebecq in *Les Particules élémentaires*. As we will see in more detail below, the Elohimites practise a polygamous and polymorphous sexuality, in particular encouraging women to ‘faire exploser [leur] féminité, et l’exhibitionnisme qui [leur] est consubstantiel, à travers toutes les tenues scintillantes, transparentes ou moulantes que l’imagination des couturiers et créateurs divers avait mises à [leur] disposition’ (*PI*, 123; 104). When not dressed in this way, the Elohimites are inclined towards naturism, following in this the model of their ‘creators’, the Elohim who have no need for clothes having achieved a total mastery of climate on their home planet (*PI*, 266; 233–4). As the tone of these passages makes clear, Houellebecq is no more indulgent of the Elohimites in *La Possibilité d’une île* than he is of the hippies in *Les Particules*. As in the earlier novel, free love turns out to be just an excuse for a minority of men to multiply their conquests of women. The Prophet enjoys having his own personal harem and acts as an alpha male such that the other male faithful dare not approach the women in the entourage, assuming sexuality to be the sole prerogative of the Prophet (*PI*, 273–4; 240–1). The ‘miracle’ that turns Elohimism into a bona fide world religion is actually a sordid settling of accounts in which an Italian man murders the Prophet for seducing his wife. The other leaders of the sect turn this into a publicity stunt, pretending the Prophet has died and been resurrected in a younger body, that of the man who is in fact his son.
This chimes neatly with the fantasies of eternal youth conjured up by the sect’s promise of a cloned future and ensures the religion’s rapid global spread since it is based on the widely popular values of youth and pleasure. In short, then, the Elohmites’ is a false Utopia, with its foundations in precisely the same individualism and self-centred hedonism that it may initially appear to renounce. And, as so often in Houellebecq, it is difficult to know just how much ironic intent should be read into this narrative: certainly the Elohmites themselves cannot be taken seriously, but is the subsequent neo-human Utopia also tainted by virtue of its origins in this hypocritical and self-serving practical joke? In this respect, we should perhaps keep in mind Fredric Jameson’s contention that, even in the work of the classical utopians such as Thomas More, Fourier, Rousseau or Saint-Simon, it is always difficult to separate the joker, on the one hand, from the committed social ideologue on the other, and Jameson suggests that we must resist the temptation to collapse the one into the other, but instead try to think both together as two poles that are necessarily in tension in utopian thought.94

The novel’s ‘real’ Utopia, then, is formed by the cloned posthuman species. The idea for this utopian community (although a ‘community’ is hardly what it turns out to be) originally comes from the Elohmites who clone the DNA of their adherents with the promise of a future ‘resurrection’ to eternal life, the assumption being that, at some stage in the future, it will be possible to store, copy and download the elements of a personality into a cloned body such that an individual consciousness will be able to transcend ageing and death. However, this programme is subsequently adapted, in a rather different way, by the first generations of clones themselves, in order to create a neo-human species deliberately distanced from its human ancestors. There are a handful of significant physical differences between humans and neo-humans. As already mentioned, the clones bypass the stages of childhood development, coming into existence as fully formed adults of eighteen years (PI, 236; 207). But, given that, as we have seen, the neo-humans never do master a technology for downloading personality, there is perhaps insufficient consideration given as to how, in the absence of a childhood as we understand it, these clones would learn everything from basic motor skills to the use of language, since they also exist in isolation, without the social contact that facilitates learning in humans. The first clones are given some significant modifications of anatomy, in order to help them evolve a more efficient system for converting energy. The digestive tract and anus are eliminated and neo-humans are instead equipped
with photosynthesising cells so they can effectively live off sunlight, with the addition of a little water and a few mineral salts (PI, 364–5; 324). As it turns out, it is this genetic modification that allows the neo-humans to survive the catastrophic climate change that largely wipes out the human population (PI, 366; 325). Later, when their study of human history leads neo-humans to believe that the sensitivity of human skin is partly responsible for the anguish experienced at the lack of a loving touch, the clones deliberately de-sensitise their nerve fibres in order to deaden this feeling (PI, 163; 141). These differences alone, although all achieved by genetic engineering rather than natural mutation, are sufficient to make of the neo-humans a separate species who feel no sense of responsibility towards humans and no compulsion to save them from their self-imposed apocalypse. As Daniel1 prophesies, the new species ‘n’aurait pas davantage d’obligation morale à l’égard des humains que ceux-ci n’en avaient à l’égard des lézards, ou des méduses’ (PI, 290; 256).

In addition to these physical differences, the lifestyle of neo-humans is very different from our own. Despite the fact that the clones were initially created as a way of immortalising the lives of the Elohmites, Daniel25 remarks with some understatement that his own life is far from that which the first Daniel would have wanted to live (PI, 406; 362). Each neo-human lives alone in a private, secure compound which he or she in principle never leaves during the course of his or her existence. Despite their lives being completely separate, they are also practically identical: as Daniel24 comments, ‘nous nous connaissons isolés mais semblables’ (PI, 139; 119). As well as being similar to their fellow neo-humans, the life of each clone is to all intents and purposes identical to that of their cloned predecessors and successors. With no significant events to mark their lives, and no desire to become anything other than what their precursors were, there is no opportunity for what Daniel25 calls ‘la fiction individuelle’ to take hold (PI, 417; 371). In the early years of the neo-humans, the founders of this new life put together a manual entitled Instructions pour une vie paisible (‘Instructions for a Peaceful Life’ (PI, 440; 392)) that laid out in detail the procedure to adopt with regard to every conceivable event in a neo-human life such that the clones are never called upon to make individual decisions which, it is presumed, would lead to desire. For the neo-humans have completely renounced desire, just as they have totally abandoned sociability: living in groups, tribes or families may have served a useful evolutionary purpose in early human societies, but, for the neo-humans, this gregariousness has
become ‘un vestige inutile et encombrant’ (PI, 411; 367), along with the sexuality that tends to go with it. As a result, laughter and tears rapidly disappear from neo-human life, since the attitudes of cruelty or compassion that would render possible these physical manifestations of sentiment are no longer imaginable in this lifestyle (PI, 61–2; 48–9). As the cloned narrator of the novel’s prologue admits, the joys of human life are unknowable to neo-humans, but ‘ses malheurs à l’inverse ne peuvent nous découdre’ (PI, 11; 3). The neo-humans believe that desire and the appetite for procreation are the result of a suffering that comes to be attached to being itself. They seek to surpass this unhappy fate in favour of a situation in which being is sufficient in itself and all else is a matter of indifference: in short, ‘la sérénité parfaite’ (‘perfect serenity’ (PI, 367; 326)).

It may well be difficult for many of Houellebecq’s contemporary readers to see this as a Utopia at all. The neo-humans never go out, never see each other, have no pleasures to speak of and spend their lives studying history while maintaining a perfectly static existence so as not to repeat its mistakes. Surely this must be regarded as more of a dystopia than a Utopia and it is likely to strike many readers, above all else, as boring. Aurélien Bellanger suggests that La Possibilité d’une île could be seen as a ‘sceptical re-reading of humanist utopias’ and notes that the Utopia of the neo-humans seemingly struggles to get started: ‘tous les éléments semblent en place, une vie nouvelle est à portée de main, mais c’est pourtant comme si rien n’avait encore commencé’. But Fredric Jameson notes that this criticism – that Utopias are boring – is one that has been commonly levelled at utopian fictions. Jameson provides a very useful corrective for our expectations regarding such fictions when he writes:

it is a mistake to approach Utopias with positive expectations, as though they offered visions of happy worlds, spaces of fulfillment and cooperation, representations which correspond generically to the idyll or the pastoral rather than the utopia. Indeed, the attempt to establish positive criteria of the desirable society characterizes liberal political theory from Locke to Rawls, rather than the diagnostic interventions of the Utopians, which, like those of the great revolutionaries, always aim at the alleviation and elimination of the sources of exploitation and suffering, rather than at the composition of blueprints for bourgeois comfort.

We need to remember that Houellebecq’s future society is separated from ours by thousands of years and it cannot therefore be expected to have the same values and preoccupations, even if the values on display in
that future society are necessarily imagined in response to contemporary ones. We might take a measure of the distance separating Houellebecq’s neo-humans from ourselves if we consider the implications of their existence as clones. As a number of commentators have pointed out, public fears around cloning, as encouraged by the discourse of popular media, have tended to focus upon a certain imagined instrumentalisation of the human. According to this discourse, if human cloning is allowed to become a reality, we can expect that cloning will be used (1) as a narcissistic tool for individuals to prolong or repeat their own selves and their own lives, and (2) as a means of creating more ‘perfect’ individuals, free from disease, defects, etc., the assumption being that there is (3) commercial value to be had from such a commodification of the human (and, following Houellebecq’s extension of the field of struggle, we might add that there would also be sexual value to be had from it). But, if the clones in La Possibilité d’une île are, in a sense, ‘improved’, insofar as they have better health, greater resistance and more longevity, none of these utopian or dystopian aspirations or fears is realised because (1) the neo-humans have no narcissism since they have almost no sense of individual consciousness; (2) it matters little that they live longer since they do not really do anything with their rigorously identical, repetitive lives and, besides, death holds no fear for them since they know they will be replaced by someone who looks identical and leads an identical life; and (3) these clones have no value because their ‘society’ has no apparent commerce, either in goods or in bodies, either financial or sexual. The point, then, is that the fears and desires that we project on to cloning – or on to the idea of a cloned ‘super-race’ – are based entirely in our own current, humanist concerns which are born of our having mortal bodies marked by individual differences. What Houellebecq stresses in La Possibilité d’une île is that, for a cloned future-race long divorced from these facts, such concerns (mortality, individuality, narcissism, the sexual struggle, business) may cease to have any pertinence, or even any meaning whatsoever.

But, if we miss the point entirely by declaring the failure of this Utopia from the perspective of our own values, we are perhaps justified in suggesting that the Utopia fails even on its own terms. Because, rather than be satisfied with this simple, featureless existence, at the end of the novel, Daniel leaves his compound and strikes out alone in search of something else, following in this the model of Marie, another neo-human with whom he has been in virtual contact, and who has heard rumours of an alternative community of neo-humans living
together on the site of what was once Lanzarote. The experiment of the neo-humans, in others words, is unsuccessful, because the attempt to create a purely lucid consciousness delivered of desire ultimately results instead in ‘la tristesse, la mélancolie, l’apathie languide et finalement mortelle’ (PI, 430; 383). If the goal of the neo-humans was to make possible a perfectly peaceful, rational existence, then, as Daniel25 bluntly puts it, ‘mon départ était là pour témoigner de son échec’ (PI, 463; 414). Daniel25’s departure gives rise to the long and eerily beautiful epilogue of La Possibilité d’une île in which the clone crosses the Iberian peninsula on his journey to Lanzarote. This final section of the novel is full of imagery that could only be called sublime. The geography of this journey is sublime in the most traditional sense of occupying a vast scale that defies the human imagination. Thus, Daniel25’s travel is impeded by the existence of a great canyon some ten kilometres across and hundreds of metres deep which runs along a fault line from the ruins of Madrid all the way through Spain, across the former Mediterranean and deep into Africa (PI, 432–3; 385–6). The vestiges of the former Spanish capital are themselves spectacular: in an extensive terrain of asphalt ribbons, here and there curving up from the ground under the influence of some subterranean heat wave, Daniel25 only gradually realises that he is in the old Barajas airport (PI, 459–60; 409). Portugal, meanwhile, has been replaced by the Grand Espace Gris (‘Great Grey Space’ (PI, 462; 411)), a vast sloping plane of ash that descends into the former Atlantic Ocean. The ocean itself has receded enough so that Daniel25 can walk all the way to Lanzarote, and what he finds there is an archipelago of islands and sandbanks separated by pools and ponds small enough to swim across (PI, 469; 418). But it is not the geography alone that makes this landscape awe-inspiring; it is also the terrifying emptiness of the land, the evidence of depopulation. For it is in this section of the novel that we learn most about the decline of humanity, including the euphemistically named ‘Première Diminution’ (‘First Decrease’ (PI, 437; 389)), which occurred when nuclear warheads were detonated in the polar ice caps, leading to the immersion of practically the whole Asian continent and dividing the human population by twenty. It is here, too, that the scattered remains of the human species are made visible to us in all their abject savagery. And, finally, when Daniel25 reaches Lanzarote after an epic journey that no human organism could endure, he finds no other neo-humans but decides nonetheless to remain in this luminous environment of islands and lakes, the novel ending with the prospect of a further sixty years of identical, empty, emotionless days (PI, 474; 422–3).
The end of *La Possibilité d’une île* is, then, incredibly, unforgettably sublime. The resurgence of the sublime is often to be found at the end of Houellebecq’s narratives: it occurs, to a lesser extent, in *Les Particules élémentaires* and, in ironically degraded form, in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *Plateforme*, then more soberly in the closing pages of *La Carte et le territoire* with their imagery of human industry and endeavour reclaimed by the impersonal forces of vegetation. I have suggested, on a previous occasion, that this play with the sublime in Houellebecq’s work is to be greeted with some suspicion since the sublime, in literature, is so closely bound up with Romantic ideology and, thereby, with a conservative politics of gender (a politics which has already been sufficiently demonstrated in Chapter 1). In the traditional discourse of the sublime, that which threatens the self (the inconceivably vast, or powerful, or formless phenomenon) ultimately serves to shore up the self through the establishing of a binary pair that replays the drama of sexual difference with one term (the sublime, or ‘masculine’ pole) taking the dominant position, while the other (the beautiful, the ‘feminine’ pole) is seen to solicit protection, affection and ultimately the desire for reproduction. We might, therefore, be justified in thinking that with the startling and alienating vista that he provides in his epilogue Houellebecq is seeking to warn us off the sterile future of the neo-humans and to redirect our sympathy towards present-day humanity, elsewhere treated with such disillusionment and contempt. But we should perhaps not be too hasty to condemn in this way the sublime imagery of Houellebecq’s novels. After all, before the sublime can be recuperated as part of a system, it is, first and foremost, that which threatens the system by exposing thought to its limits. As Jean-François Lyotard comments, if all thought operates by establishing relations between things, in the encounter with the sublime, thought is brought into contact with the absolute, as that which is without relation. Thought can therefore only think the absolute through a kind of disavowal of this non-relation. As Lyotard puts it: ‘[La pensée] s’interdit l’absolu pour autant qu’elle le veut encore. Il en résulte dans la pensée une sorte de spasme’. In *La Possibilité d’une île*, thought reaches its limits by trying to imagine a thought that outlasts its own conditions of possibility, that is as a system of apprehending and organising the world that has evolved in biological organisms with discrete bodies marked by individual difference with each ultimately responsible for its own subsistence. What would become of thought in a species for which individual differences no longer had any measurable impact upon life, and for whom the most basic concerns
of subsistence – whether of the individual, through nutrients, or of the species, through procreation – had ceased to operate with any urgency? Perhaps, in the end, all the sublime imagery that closes *La Possibilité d’une île* is a kind of displacement of the anguish, of the *spasm* undergone by thought in the effort to think the posthuman, to think beyond the conditions of its own existence.

**Religion**

These questions of the sublime, the absolute and the ineffable lead us, finally, to one of the most problematic issues in Houellebecq’s writing – his frequent, but never straightforward, appeal to religion. As we have repeatedly seen in the course of this book, when faced with the ruthlessness of market forces – operating, as we now know, in the sexual sphere just as much as the commercial sector – there is a persistent sense, in Houellebecq’s writing, that *something is missing* from our societies. If little credence is given to politics as a way of filling this void in contemporary culture, there is a recurring – though never entirely committed – appeal to religion as offering the promise of something more than just quantifiable value to the market. Religious reference is present in Houellebecq’s novelistic enterprise from the very beginning: *Extension du domaine de la lutte* opens with an epigraph from Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, 13:12: ‘The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light’ (*EDL*, 5; 3). The epigraph picks up on the sense of righteous indignation implied by the quasi-Marxist phrasing of the title and seemingly implies that the grim worlds of thankless work and hopeless sexuality subsequently described in *Extension* belong to these ‘works of darkness’ that are ultimately to be shunned in favour of the path of righteousness.112 At the same time, though, there is a clear sense, in *Extension*, that such religious rhetoric has no obvious place in our society today. When meeting a former classmate who has become a priest, the narrator is deeply uncomfortable. In a restaurant, when the priest exhorts the narrator to accept his divine nature, people at the next table turn to stare (*EDL*, 32; 30). Doubtless because of this incongruous effect, Houellebecq sometimes uses religious reference as part of his disorienting mixture of registers, often alongside more typically sordid or mundane detail. At the novel’s opening party, where the two departmental frumps discuss mini-skirts, the narrator reflects, ‘Leur voix me
paraissaient venir de très haut, un peu comme le Saint-Esprit’ (EDL, 6; 4). Later, in one of the narrator’s animal stories, a farmer tasked with artificially inseminating a cow is described as symbolising God (EDL, 11; 9) and, when the narrator is hospitalised in a psychiatric facility, he compares himself to Jesus Christ, having the vague sense that ‘j’étais là pour accomplir un plan préétabli’ (‘I was there to accomplish some pre-arranged plan’ (EDL, 150; 149)). In Les Particules élémentaires, meanwhile, Houellebecq documents the growth of ‘New-Age’ spiritualities which borrow liberally from a variety of religious traditions in, as Stephen Hunt puts it, ‘an ever-expanding spiritual marketplace’ or, following Stark and Bainbridge, the ‘supermarket of faiths’.

Houellebecq gives a sense of the homogenising effects of this spiritual hypermarket when he relates a conversation overheard at the Lieu du Changement: ‘Pouvait-on assimiler Jésus à Krishna, ou sinon à quoi? Fallait-il préférer Rintintin à Rusty?’ (PE, 112; 130–1). Meanwhile, Houellebecq is clear that, as with everything else, spiritual exploration is sometimes just a strategy for improving one’s sex life. As we saw in Chapter 1, Francesco di Meola’s main interest in the hippy movement is the facility with which it allows him to attract young women who think they are being liberated when he takes advantage of them. Elsewhere, religion is revealed as ceding ever more ground before the superior ability of experimental science to describe the universe. Thus the discovery of fossil evidence of bacterial life on Mars ‘contredisait avec violence toutes les constructions mythiques ou religieuses dont l’humanité fait classiquement ses délices’ (PE, 123; 144). And it is with an ironic satisfaction that Houellebecq reports the predictable opposition of all the monotheistic religions to Michel Djerzinski’s biotechnological solution to humanity’s troubles (PE, 308–9; 371).

In the light of the preceding survey, it would clearly be overly simplistic to try to reclaim Houellebecq as a Christian writer, as Vincent Lloyd seems to want to do in a recent article. Lloyd discusses the prophetic, near-biblical tone of certain passages of La Possibilité d’une île and suggests that Houellebecq is concerned with, and seeking to defend, the traditional theological virtues of faith, hope and love.

It is certainly true that there are many biblical echoes in La Possibilité d’une île: Fanny van Cuenebroeck points to the chapter headings which resemble biblical chapter and verse references (‘Daniel25,11’, etc.); the fact that the opening pages come across almost as an encoded text, together with their prophetic tone; the biblical names of several characters (Daniel, Esther, Marie); and the way in which the entire novel is placed under the open
question ‘Qui parmi vous mérite la vie éternelle?’ (‘Who, among you, deserves eternal life?’ (PI, 10; 2)). In addition, Aurélien Bellanger has suggested that the story of the neo-humans, culminating in Daniel25’s expedition to Lanzarote, is a story of temptation and flight from Eden, comparable to Genesis. Although these references are seemingly very deliberate, we must, I think, take at face value Houellebecq’s professed relationship to Christianity which he has discussed at some length in Ennemis publics. Houellebecq describes how he attended church and studied the Bible for some ten or twenty years in an authentic attempt at engagement with Christianity, but that ‘le problème c’est que Dieu, je n’y crois toujours pas’ (EP, 143; 139). Nonetheless, notwithstanding his intolerance of Islam, it is rare for Houellebecq to make cheap jokes at the expense of religion, as he does with so many other subjects. There is clearly some residual respect, or even awe, for genuine faith in Houellebecq. For instance, the passages quoted above from Extension du domaine de la lutte result not so much in laughter as in an uneasy sense of an aspiration towards the holy that is thwarted by the world’s limitations. And Houellebecq writes very clearly in La Possibilité d’une île: ‘lorsque [les êtres humains] donnent […] l’impression d’être animés par une foi profonde, par quelque chose qui outrepasse l’instinct de survie, le mécanisme grippe, le rire est arrêté dans son principe’ (PI, 234; 204). In Ennemis publics, Houellebecq recognises that a ‘spiritual principle’ is ‘ce qu’il y a, au monde, de plus difficile à vaincre’ (EP, 113; 109). He goes on to argue that however much we may object to the form of the current religious revival (Christian and Islamic fundamentalism) we may be obliged to accept that the return of religion is inevitable; it is, Houellebecq says, his ‘persistent intuition’ that for a society to live without religion would ultimately be suicidal (EP, 166; 161).

It is doubtless this position that explains Houellebecq’s interest, developed in Lanzarote and La Possibilité d’une île, for what he calls religious sects – what might more properly be called cults in English, had that term not come to be associated, rather unfairly, with abusive groups of brainwashed fanatics. It is perhaps surprising that Houellebecq does not choose simply to mock these groups. In summary, his attitude towards religious cults would appear to be a broad approval, or at least an understanding, of their aspirations regarding sexual utopianism and immortality, but a suspicion of their dogmatic leadership and their reliance on tall tales. In Lanzarote, Rudi, the unhappy Belgian tourist who eventually decides to join a cult, acknowledges, in a letter to the narrator, that such a decision tends to be interpreted, in our western
societies as ‘a dramatic personal failing’ (L, 51; 65) because it implies a renunciation of individual freedom. Ultimately, then, it is perhaps because – as we have seen throughout this book – Houellebecq is unfailingly critical of the ideology of individual freedom that he regards religious cults with some sympathy. In *Lanzarote*, the cult depicted is the really existing Raëlian religion, founded by the Frenchman Claude Vorilhon. Raëlism is commonly described as a ‘UFO cult’ since it teaches that human life was created and brought to Earth by extraterrestrial beings who will, one day, return to our planet. What is striking about *Lanzarote* is that Houellebecq relates the Raëlian origin narrative as fact, in the pluperfect tense of the indicative: ‘En 1973, [Claude Vorilhon] avait rencontré des extraterrestres lors d’une excursion dans le cratère du Puy de Lassolas. Ceux-ci se faisaient appeler les Elohim; ils avaient créé l’humanité en laboratoire, bien des millions d’années auparavant [...] ils avaient délivré un message à Claude Vorilhon’, etc. (L, 34; 39). When the narrator is given a questionnaire by an adept inviting him to calculate his ‘sensual quotient’, he concludes that he is in no danger: ‘on aurait pu trouver ça dans n’importe quel numéro de *Elle*’ (L, 34; 40). Furthermore, he muses that the idea of life having been brought to Earth from outer space is, from a scientific point of view, ‘pas complètement absurde’ (‘not de facto an absurd notion’ (L, 35; 40)) and he can appreciate the aesthetic reasons for choosing Lanzarote as the probable site of the Elohim’s return to Earth; he protests only that ‘j’avais tout de même un peu de mal à y croire’ (L, 36; 43). Later, he even comes to concede that Raël could be a ‘good prophet’ whose ideas may benefit humanity (L, 53; 70). At the end of the novella, however, a scandal erupts when it is revealed that the Raëlians organised mass orgies, sometimes involving children, and, far from showing any remorse about this, the adepts claim to be ‘à la pointe de l’évolution des mœurs’ (‘part of some sort of evolving moral avant-garde’ (L, 58; 77)). Raël himself profits from the scandal in order to present himself as the true prophet, the real successor of Moses, and to announce ‘un nouvel érotisme sacré’ (‘a new, sacred eroticism’ (L, 60; 80)). In *La Possibilité d’une île*, the cult is a fictional entity, but its name (the Elohimites) and many of its characteristics are clearly borrowed from the Raëlian religion. Prior to their discovery of the secret of eternal life, the Elohimites are principally distinguished by their healthy diet and their practice of sensuality (PI, 116; 97–8). Past the age of puberty, any consensual sexual activity is welcomed and indeed encouraged in this cult, although they value the expression of femininity over masculinity (PI, 122–3; 103–4). They also
practise naturism (*PL*, 266; 233–4) and communal love, what the prophet calls ‘l’amour véritable, non-possessif’ (‘the true, unpossessive love’ (*PL*, 193; 168)). It turns out, however, that the prophet is essentially an alpha male who has gathered his own private harem of young ‘fiancées’, who are reserved for the exclusive use of the Elohim themselves, or, pending their return to Earth, of their earthly representative, the prophet (*PL*, 227; 198–9).

Houellebecq is, then, always alert to the ways in which any kind of social institution – here, a new religious movement – can be used to grant leverage in the sexual marketplace. Clearly, in *La Possibilité d’une île*, the prophet’s claim to practise ‘l’amour véritable’ is treated ironically. Nonetheless, it is the search for love, and the valuing of love in the rhetoric of religions, that to some extent explains their continued appeal for Houellebecq. If, as the novels demonstrate, love is the one figure that is significant by its absence in our sexually liberated – or liberally sexualised – sphere, then the aspiration towards, or thirst for, love is one factor that may account for the persistence of religious feeling. After all, as Houellebecq remarks somewhat incredulously in *Ennemis publics*, even committed atheists continue to believe in the possibility of love, ‘ou du moins à se comporter comme s’ils y croyaient’ (‘or at least behave as though they believe’ (*EP*, 150; 145)). We saw, in Chapter 2, that *Plateforme* has been praised by some critics for its moving depiction of romantic love. *Plateforme* offers the only sustained example in Houellebecq’s writing in which love and sex are united, such that sex takes on a new meaning:

Lorsque j’amenais Valérie à l’orgasme, que je sentais son corps vibrer sous le mien, j’avais parfois l’impression, fugace mais irrésistible, d’accéder à un niveau de conscience entièrement différent, où tout mal était aboli. Dans ces moments suspendus, pratiquement immobiles, où son corps montait vers le plaisir, je me sentais comme un Dieu, dont dépendaient la sérénité et les orages. Ce fut la première joie – indiscutable, parfaite.128

(*P*, 158; 162)

The point of *Plateforme*’s narrative, for many critics, is the transition that leads Michel from being an antisocial and rather affectless client of Thai prostitutes to become Valérie’s devoted lover. In what is effectively an ancient Judeo–Christian tradition, Michel is redeemed by the discovery of selfless love. As Nelly Kaprielián points out, Houellebecq’s trick, and arguably the reason for his artistic and commercial success, is to inscribe this ancient narrative within a context (the rather sordid world
of sex tourism) where it seems most unlikely, precisely in order to show what is missing from our contemporary culture. Love and religion, it seems, are mutually dependent: no religion is possible in a world without love, and no love is to be found in a world without religion. Houellebecq states as much quite clearly, and with an unambiguously religious rhetoric, in Plateforme: ‘En l’absence d’amour, rien ne peut être sanctifié’ (‘In the absence of love, nothing can be sanctified’ (P, 115; 116)). And, lest we think this phrase is an aberration in Houellebecq’s discourse, it recurs some sixty pages later. Noting that, in his dedication to Valérie’s happiness, he is taking an interest in cookery for the first time in his life, Michel muses simply, ‘L’amour sanctifie’ (‘Love sanctifies’ (P, 177; 182)).

Of course, the other important reason for the persistence of religion, and another crucial theme in Houellebecq’s work, is the desire to believe in immortality, or at least in some kind of life after death. Houellebecq suggests that the promise of eternal life constitutes, for all the monotheistic religions, ‘un fantastique produit d’appel’ (EP, 171; 166). A key insight of Houellebecq’s writing is that it is the technological means actually to achieve this immortality in practice that is likely to give rise to a resurgence in religion in the twenty-first century. This may at first appear paradoxical: the ability of science to render practically possible what was, for centuries, merely an article of faith, rather than sounding the final death knell of religion, will be responsible for its revival, since we will need a religion to make sense of the new givens of human life, and to organise the new community of immortals (I2, 252–3). This physical immortality is the goal of the new religious movements in Lanzarote and La Possibilité d’une île. Both invest in research into human cloning as a means of achieving immortality ‘dès maintenant et sur cette terre’ (L, 51; 65). In other words, these movements are using science and technology to address problems that religion has traditionally dealt with ‘de manière beaucoup plus irrationnelle et métaphorique’ (‘more irrationally and metaphorically’ (L, 51; 66)). The Elohimites in La Possibilité d’une île are exploring the same technology. Their religion takes off thanks to a carefully stage-managed publicity stunt. The prophet is murdered by a jealous husband of one of his ‘fiancées’ but the other cult leaders decide to make it look as though he has chosen to ‘abandonner son corps vieillissant pour transférer son code génétique dans un nouvel organisme’ (PI, 279; 245). The prophet’s real (genetic) son agrees to play along in the role of the resurrected prophet. This apparent physical promise of resurrection
accounts for the sudden dramatic success of the Elohimite religion, which, as Houellebecq notes, is perfectly in keeping with the Zeitgeist of the leisure society. The Elohimites have no moral code to impose and give no particular spiritual significance to the promise of resurrection: it represents simply ‘la prolongation illimitée de la vie matérielle, c’est-à-dire […] la satisfaction illimitée des désirs physiques’ (PL, 352; 311).

The hopeless search for love and the quest for physical immortality will be familiar themes to all readers of Houellebecq. What has been less widely recognised, however, in attempts to think through Houellebecq’s relation to religious ideas, is the frequency with which his writing offers images of emptiness, stillness and stasis. This is the final trope in Houellebecq’s work that I would like to associate with a certain spiritual aspiration since these are all images that may be seen as conducive to meditation or prayer. It is remarkable that each of Houellebecq’s full-length novels closes with some sort of image of stillness or emptiness. At the end of Extension du domaine de la lutte, the narrator cycles out into the middle of nowhere achieving an almost-transcendent state of physical exhaustion. The end of Les Particules élémentaires offers both the image of Michel’s monastic lifestyle in western Ireland, a mysterious region in which ‘tout semble indiquer une présence’ (PE, 292; 350); and the evocation of a posthuman race which is presumed to be peaceful and serene, having shaken off humanity’s troubles (indeed, it is only in the light of the novel’s closing pages that we are in a position to understand the lyrical opening pages in which the neo-humans are described as living ‘Dans un halo de joie […] Dans des après-midi inépuisables’ (PE, 10; 7). At the end of Plateforme, Michel is certainly not happy, but he is at least calm. Following the death of Valérie, he retires to Pattaya and does nothing, simply waiting for life to end: ‘Parfois j’allume la climatisation le matin, je l’éteins le soir, et entre les deux il ne se passe rigoureusement rien’ (P, 348; 359). La Possibilité d’une ile closes on an image of a clone in an empty, post-apocalyptic landscape, living out an endless series of identical days. In La Carte et le territoire, finally, Jed Martin spends the last thirty years of his life following the same routine, slowly creating artworks based on the superimposition of very long, unchanging video images. As we have seen, there is always some uncertainty among Houellebecq’s readers as to whether these conclusions are to be taken as utopian or dystopian. But it does seem that Houellebecq himself looks quite favourably upon these prospects. Asked by the German weekly Die Zeit to describe his dream of eternal life, Houellebecq imagines himself living in a cave in
which ‘il ne se passe pas grand-chose’ (‘not a lot happens’) (I2, 179).
But he claims he does not fear boredom: ‘Je ne trouve pas ennuyeux
de répéter à l’infini ce que j’aime faire’ (I2, 181).137 There is, in many
of Houellebecq’s protagonists, but perhaps especially in the narrator of
Extension and in Plateforme’s Michel, a certain refusal of agitation and
an almost total lack of interests in the traditional sense. When Michel
moves in with Valérie he realises with some consternation that there is
nothing at all he desires to keep from his own apartment (P, 175; 181).
Similarly, when they plan to move to Thailand, Michel intends to spend
his time doing nothing in particular, and is unsure how to explain this
to someone like Jean-Yves who has always been extremely active (P,
318; 329). (A similar lack of understanding persists between the very
unhurried and unidirectional Jed Martin and his formerly dynamic
businessman father (CT, 343).) There would be something almost
monastic about this lifestyle in Houellebecq’s novels were it not for the
residual attachment to sex, which remains much stronger than any will
towards God or the spiritual. It seems, though, that for Houellebecq
the ideal would be a sort of calming of desire. He notes that in a place
like Pattaya where all possible sexual fantasies are cheaply catered for
the paradoxical result in the long run may be an attenuation of desire
(I2, 199). This is certainly what Michel finds, who quickly ceases all
relations with prostitutes. As he says, ‘Si je laissais la passion pénétrer
dans mon corps, la douleur viendrait rapidement à sa suite’ (P, 348;
359).138 There is, in this attitude, some relation to the Buddhist notion of
suffering deriving from attachment to desire which entails enslavement
to an illusory reality. Michel encounters these ideas in his travels in
Thailand, and notes them with some approval (P, 104; 104). Indeed,
in Les Particules élémentaires, Michel Djerzinski insists that not only
Buddhism but all serious religions and philosophies have arrived at the
conclusion that desire is ‘source de souffrance, de haine et de malheur’
(‘a source of suffering, pain and hatred’) (PE, 161; 192)). And Buddhism,
we might note, is the only religion that does not condemn Djerzinski’s
proposal for a genetically modified solution to human suffering (PE,
309; 371). As Françoise Grauby has noted, in Houellebecq, ‘Le bonheur
s’identifie [... ] plutôt à une absence d’être’.139 Perhaps this is the ultimate
sense of Houellebecq’s flirtation with religion in his writing: the idea
that happiness is not of this world, indeed, that attachment to the things
of this world can only prevent us from attaining it. On the contrary, the
only kind of serenity we can hope to reach is through a practice akin to
prayer or meditation that momentarily cuts us off from desire.
Conclusion

As we have seen elsewhere in this book (see, for instance, the conclusion to Chapter 1), Michel Houellebecq continues to waver between fully posthumanist and residually humanist understandings of the world and this uncertainty leads to many of the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies within his œuvre. The view of the world put forward in *H. P. Lovecraft* and *Rester vivant* may, at first glance, appear a cold and ruthless one, stripped of humanist comforts such as the belief in progress, self-actualisation and the perfectibility of the human. What remains residually humanist about it, however, is its focus on suffering. As we saw in the first section of this chapter, these two texts, and *Rester vivant* especially, repeatedly stress that the default position of life is suffering and, following Schopenhauer, that our consciousness of suffering, and therefore our ability to anticipate it (including the suffering of old age and death) mean that, as humans, we somehow suffer more than other animals. From a properly posthumanist view, however, that replaces species in their evolutionary context – a view that Houellebecq frequently seems to adopt in his novels, and notably in *La Possibilité d'une île* – suffering is irrelevant. What is important is the adaptation of species to their environment and not the suffering experienced by individuals as a result of their greater or lesser conformity to the adaptive model. It is perhaps this hesitancy that Houellebecq inherits most clearly from Schopenhauer. For Schopenhauer’s concept of the Will is a properly posthumanist invention: effectively a way of detaching will from the ephemeral stirrings of individual desire and locating it instead in the ongoing evolution of life itself that is heedless to the preferences of any individual creature. It is just this perspective that Houellebecq attains in many of the most striking and troubling passages of his writing when his accounts of the broad cultural shifts affecting our species cast individual concerns into insignificance. Yet Schopenhauer, like Houellebecq, reinscribes a certain humanist individualism into his philosophy through his overriding focus on suffering. This can be seen, for instance, in the title of his essay ‘On the Suffering of the World’: after all, from the perspective of the Will, *the world* does not suffer and it is meaningless to suggest as much; only individuals suffer, and the more they overestimate the significance of their own will, the more they will suffer.

A similar confusion is perhaps to be found in Houellebecq’s account of evolution in the natural world. In Houellebecq’s work, the animal
kingdom is repeatedly presented as the theatre of a brutal ‘struggle for life’, and human behaviour continues to partake of this viciousness, especially in the ruthless sexual selection that favours some and sidelines others. The depiction of the humans regressed to a state of savagery in the epilogue of La Possibilité d’une île is perhaps the clearest indication given in all of Houellebecq’s work of the real proximity we retain to our primate cousins. But, aside from the numerous examples in natural history of adaptive traits that are not characterised by strength, force and ferocity, the very notion of a ‘struggle for life’ is an anthropocentric fiction imposed on the evolutionary process. It is not the case that species are seeking, above all, to reproduce themselves: species are not seeking anything at all, although individuals may seek to copulate and may encounter struggles in doing so. Successful species reproduction is merely the consequence of the interaction between randomly occurring characteristics and their environment.

The distinction between a humanist (or anthropocentric) and posthumanist (non-anthropocentric) way of conceiving these questions may be further clarified if we look again at the two Utopias found in La Possibilité d’une île. As we saw above, the first Utopia, that of the Elohimite cult, turns out to be essentially an excuse for one man to wield power and surround himself with the amorous attentions of a series of young women. For the adepts of the cult, on the other hand, the principal attraction is the scientifically supported promise of physical immortality, which, as Houellebecq makes clear, trades cynically on contemporary culture’s obsession with youth and terror of ageing. In short, then, by growing out of selfish and all-too-human desires, the Elohimite cult turns out to be unworthy of the name Utopia since it ultimately changes little. If things are really to change, then the future has to be thought outside this anthropocentric perspective. This is what is achieved by the neo-humans who do away with everything we might recognise as humanist traits: individualism, purpose, self-direction. As a result, their Utopia appears cold and dull to us and, in the end, it too can perhaps no longer even be considered a Utopia, since the very concept of Utopia is a humanist one, an obvious descendant of the Enlightenment belief in human perfectibility. If La Possibilité d’une île has received more invective from critics than any other of Houellebecq’s novels it is surely because this vision of the future is one of his bravest imaginative acts and the most unsparing of the reader’s need for a humanist narrative crutch. Arguably, Houellebecq himself is unable to relinquish such supports completely, since the departure of Daniel25 in the epilogue testifies to a
restlessness within this apparently desireless species and to the ineradicable pull of certain humanist ideals (poetry, love, community, Utopia). Nonetheless, the lack of closure at the end of the novel – the absence of the rumoured community in Lanzarote – demonstrates Houellebecq’s refusal to succumb to narrative comforts.

Finally, though, Houellebecq’s repeated, if tentative, turns to religious thought necessarily betray the difficulty of leaving behind a humanist conception of the world. Because, as Jean-Marie Schaeffer reminds us, the fundamental tenets of the ‘human exception’ thesis – the belief that humans somehow obey different rules or have a separate destiny to other animals – are partly, if not principally, derived from Christian thinking. That said, what Houellebecq seems to value most in religious traditions is not any promise of the special or privileged nature of humanity, nor is it religious faith and practice as a mode of self-realisation. Instead, Houellebecq seems drawn to religion (and in particular Buddhism, therefore a religion that developed outside the western humanist tradition) as a practice that values self-abnegation. Ironically, given the historical role played by religion in shoring up ideologies of humanism, Houellebecq suggests that religious thinking may be most useful today in providing a way to think outside the focus on individual desire that has become ingrained in us through decades of relatively peaceful and carefree consumerism. In other words, religious thinking can be an important step in the direction of a posthumanist perspective. One of the most powerful insights of La Possibilité d’une île is the implication that the kind of social changes required in order to avert the demographic and climatological emergencies that could prove destructive to our species over the coming century cannot be brought about through liberal democracy since it is liberal democracy that has shaped the behaviours responsible for these threatening calamities. A world view that values, monetises and encourages selfish desire is necessarily inadequate to the task of radical social change with a view to a more sustainable future. If we are to avoid the kind of collective suicide that Houellebecq repeatedly envisions in his fiction, it may well require a solution with the organisational structure and the force of conviction of a religion.