Notes

Introduction


2 Ibid., p. 28.

3 As this book is above all a study of Houellebecq’s novels, it will contain no discussion of the film adaptations of these works. This is partly for reasons of space, but partly also because I consider the films unworthy of much comment. Philippe Harrel’s adaptation of Extension du domaine de la lutte (1999) is an honourable exception, and does an impressive job of bringing to the screen the distinctive tone of Houellebecq’s writing (though this is partly achieved through lengthy passages of the novel’s text read in voiceover). The German film of Les Particules élementaires, Elementarteilchen (Oskar Roehler, 2006), is a travesty that, by amputating Houellebecq’s novel of its science-fiction frame, turns it into a knockabout farce of the hippy era, thereby eliminating almost all of the serious content to be found in the book. Finally, Houellebecq’s own adaptation of La Possibilité d’une île (2008) is little short of an artistic calamity that, again, strips the novel of most of its interest, and turns it into a ponderous and largely unfathomable bore. I am inclined to agree with the Cahiers du cinéma critic who concluded that La Possibilité d’une île is not so much a film, merely ‘a bunch of shots’ (Jean-Philippe Tessé, ‘La Possibilité d’une île’, Cahiers du cinéma 637 (September 2008), p. 46). The film was a critical disaster in France, and rightly so, but, judging by the success of La Carte et le territoire, it appears that this misadventure has had little lasting effect over Houellebecq’s literary career, at least.

4 ‘reflects his time as accurately as Proust or Céline reflected theirs, to the point of incarnating it’, Olivier Bardolle, La Littérature à vif (Le cas Houellebecq) (Paris: L’Esprit des péninsules, 2004), p. 47.

5 Ibid., p. 13.

7 Demonpion, Houellebecq non autorisé, p. 85.
11 ‘a writer is always unhappy’, ibid., p. 15.
12 Cros, Ci-git Paris, p. 90.
13 Bardolle, La Littérature à vif, p. 48.
14 Patricola, Michel Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente, p. 19.
16 ‘something like the Droopy of the sociological pamphlet’, Jourde, La Littérature sans estomac, p. 234.
17 ‘an encounter between a posture, a discourse, a work and a century’, Patricola, Michel Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente, p. 36.
19 For an account of the affaire Perpendiculaire, see Patricola, Michel Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente, pp. 49–52.
20 See, for instance, Demonpion, Houellebecq non autorisé, pp. 292–6.
22 See Patricola, Michel Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente, pp. 52–5.
23 Ibid., p. 43. On Houellebecq’s relationship to French literary prizes, see also Demonpion, Houellebecq non autorisé, pp. 273–6.
24 Patricola, Michel Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente, pp. 11, 95–6.
25 Ibid., p. 25.
27 Jourde, La Littérature sans estomac, p. 223.
28 Demonpion, Houellebecq non autorisé, pp. 327–8.
31 Cros, Ci-git Paris, p. 86.
32 Patricola, Michel Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente, p. 232.
33 ‘a systematic complacency with the sordid, the obscene, the smutty’, Waldberg, La Parole putanisée, p. 39.
Notes to pages 6–14  165

34 Patricola, Michel Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente, p. 102.
38 Jean-Marie Schaeffer, La Fin de l’exception humaine (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).
40 Ibid., p. 47.
41 Ibid., p. xxv.
42 Ibid., p. 88.
43 ‘A game of specialists’ (Po, 128).

Chapter One

2 Deciding what constitutes pornography is of course notoriously problematic and one person’s pornography is another person’s erotica. These problems of definition are the subject of this and the following paragraph and I have tried to make clear what each critic’s understanding of the term implies. For my own purposes, I am working with the following commonsense understanding of pornography: a representation is pornographic if it is sold on the understanding that it contains graphic depictions of sexual bodies and/or sexual activity and that the principal goal of the representation is the sexual arousal or titillation of the consumer, over and above any other effects that the representation may have (e.g., related to its aesthetic qualities). This understanding is consistent with that of the Concise Oxford English Dictionary (2008), which defines pornography as ‘printed or visual matter intended to stimulate sexual excitement’. From this perspective, I do not believe anyone could seriously claim that any of Houellebecq’s novels are pornographic as a whole, although certain passages could be seen to serve a pornographic function. It is precisely this question that is explored in these paragraphs.
6 Douglas Morrey, ‘Michel Houellebecq and the International Sexual


9 Schuerewegen, ‘Scènes de cul’, p. 93.


14 ‘The sluts were wearing nothing under their tee shirts. Bruno watched them as they passed; his cock ached’ (*PE*, 98; 114).


16 ‘it was a melodrama where the characters were babes and dogs, hot guys and bitches; that was Bruno’s world’ (*PE*, 122; 143).

17 ‘the girl was no great beauty, and would doubtless be a pushover; her breasts, though good-sized, were already a bit slack, and her buttocks appeared flaccid; in a few years, one felt, all this would sag completely. On the other hand her somewhat audacious get-up unambiguously underlined her intention to find a sexual partner […] here was a girl who must surely carry condoms in her bag’ (*EDL*, 112; 110–11).

18 ‘she had probably been quite pretty once, but her delicate features had faded a little and her skin was blotchy […] The curve of her mons was beautiful even if her labia sagged a little’ (*PE*, 139–40; 165).

19 ‘The good thing, though, was she had big tits […] Later, her tits started to go south and our marriage went with them’ (*PE*, 170; 203).

20 ‘My body is like a bag criss-crossed with red threads; ‘deep inside me I can feel / Something soft, and nasty, is moving’; ‘For years I have hated this meat / That covers my bones. A fatty layer / Sensitive to pain, slightly spongy…’ (*Po*, 117).

21 ‘you are always waiting / For a kind of tribute / That could be paid to you or refused / And your only possibility in the final analysis is to wait’ (*Po*, 102).

22 ‘She’s not all that pretty. As well as prominent teeth she has lifeless hair, little eyes that burn with anger. No breasts or buttocks to speak of. God has not, in truth, been too kind to her […] I get the impression she’s beyond trying it on with a man’ (*EDL*, 28; 25–6).

23 ‘That hole she had at the base of her belly [that] must appear so useless
to her; a prick can always be cut off, but how do you forget the emptiness of a vagina?’ (*EDL*, 47; 44).

24 ‘At the time I knew her, in the bloom of her seventeen years, Brigitte Bardot was truly repulsive. First of all she was extremely fat, a porker and even a super-porker, with abundant rolls of fat gracelessly disposed at the intersections of her obese body. Yet had she followed a slimming diet of the most frightening severity for twenty-five years her fate would not have been markedly improved. Because her skin was blotchy, puffy and acned. And her face was wide, flat and round, with little deep-set eyes, and straggly, lustreless hair. Indeed, the comparison with a sow forced itself on everyone in an inevitable and natural way.

She had no girlfriends, and obviously no boyfriends. She was therefore completely alone [...]. Her hormonal mechanisms must have functioned normally, there’s no reason to suppose otherwise. And then? [...] Did she imagine masculine hands lingering between the folds of her obese belly? (*EDL*, 88–9; 87–8).

25 ‘The terrible predicament of a beautiful girl is that only an experienced womaniser, someone cynical and without scruple, feels that he is up to the challenge. More often than not, she will lose her virginity to some filthy lowlife in what can prove to be the first step in an irrevocable decline’ (*PE*, 58; 67–8).

26 Jean-François Patricola has also argued, not without some justification, that the female characters in Houellebecq’s novels are not sufficiently interesting or well drawn for us to care about their unfortunate fates. See *Michel Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente* (Paris: Éditions Écriture, 2005), p. 146.

27 ‘smoke marijuana cigarettes with very young girls attracted by the spiritual aura of the movement and then fuck them amongst the mandalas and the smell of incense’ (*PE*, 81; 94).

28 ‘Having exhausted the possibilities of sexual pleasure, it was reasonable that individuals, liberated from the contraints of ordinary morality, should turn their attentions to the wider pleasures of cruelty’ (*PE*, 211; 252).


30 ‘women who turned 20 in the late Sixties found themselves in a difficult position when they hit 40. Most of them were divorced and could no longer count on the conjugal bond – whether warm or abject – whose decline they had served to hasten. As members of a generation who – more than any before – had endorsed a cult of youth over age, they could hardly claim to be surprised when they, in their turn, were dismissed by succeeding generations. As their flesh began to age, the cult of the body, which they had done so much to promote, simply filled them with disgust for their own bodies – a disgust they could see mirrored in the gaze of others’ (*PE*, 106–7; 125).

31 ‘Never could abide feminists [...] they could never shut up about the
washing up [...] In a few short years, they managed to turn every man they knew into an impotent, whingeing neurotic. Once they’d done that, it was always the same story – they started going on about how there were no real men any more. They usually ended up ditching their boyfriends for a quick fuck with some macho idiot [...] and [would] wind up with a kid. Then they’re off making jam and collecting recipe cards from Marie Claire’ (PE, 145–6; 173–4).

32 For instance, Natasha Walter notes that the ‘focus on independence and self-expression is now sold back to young women as the narrowest kind of consumerism and self-objectification’, Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism (London: Virago, 2011), p. 65. Nina Power even suggests that the very term ‘feminism’ may have ceased to be useful given its hasty appropriation by all manner of ideological positions: ‘As a political term, “feminism” has become so broad that it can be used to justify almost anything, even the invasion of other countries’, One-Dimensional Woman (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), p. 12.

33 ‘The guy’s name was Laurent, he was about 30, expansive, with a little red moustache. He insisted that she call him Laurent [...] He liked to establish a rapport with his clients; he thought of them almost as friends. He had been an advocate of women’s rights from the beginning, and he believed that there was still a long way to go’ (PE, 86–7; 101–2).

34 ‘He hasn’t made love in over a year’ (Po, 14).

35 ‘he was surrounded by the vulvas of young women, sometimes less than three feet away, but Bruno realised that they were closed to him’ (PE, 66; 69).

36 ‘a bad farce, one last sordid joke that life had played on him’ (PE, 245; 295).

37 ‘Most people, in fact, are quickly bored by the subject [...] we need to hear ourselves repeat that life is marvellous and exciting; and it’s abundantly clear that we rather doubt this’ (EDL, 31–2; 29–30).

38 The remark is in fact made by a priest in conversation with the narrator. We will look again at the significance of this attribution in our discussion of narrative voice later in this chapter.


41 Guillebaud, La Tyrannie du plaisir, p. 138.


‘You must desire. You must be desirable. You must take part in the competition, in the struggle, in the life of the world. If you stop, you will no longer exist. If you stay behind, you’re dead’ (I, 76/I2, 41/RV, 52).


47 Guillebaud, *La Tyrannie du plaisir*, p. 16.

48 Ibid., pp. 152–3.


51 Despentes, *King Kong Théorie*, p. 111.


54 Weeks, *The World We Have Won*, p. 113.

55 ‘In a world that only respects youth, individuals are gradually *devoured*’ (*PE*, 112, my translation. Wynne’s translation of this sentence is incorrect: ‘A world in which the young have no respect eventually devours everyone’, 131).

56 ‘the sum of pleasures that life has left to offer is outweighed by the sum of pain [...] This weighing up of pleasure and pain which, sooner or later, everyone is forced to make, leads logically, at a certain age, to suicide [...] in general, the suicide of elderly people – by far the most commonplace – seems to us perfectly rational’ (*PE*, 247–8; 297).

57 ‘For women, their mature years brought only failure, masturbation and shame’ (*PE*, 107; 126, modified).

58 ‘It was starting to become a national obsession, all because they hated old people and loathed the idea of old age’ (*PE*, 198; 237–8).


61 Ibid., p. 204.


63 Ibid., p. 9.

64 Ibid., pp. 170–1.

65 Also missing from statistics are the potentially significant numbers of people who are married but not having sex. As Catherine Hakim notes, ‘Celibate marriages are far more common than we realize, because hardly anyone wants to admit to the problem. Sex surveys never bother to provide the relevant statistics, because celibacy and sexual abstinence are not a problem for AIDS and other STDs’, *Honey Money: The Power of Erotic Capital* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), p. 59.

67 ‘Why does my gaze frighten women away? Do they find it beseeching, desperate, angry or perverse? I don’t know, I will probably never know; and this is the cause of my life’s unhappiness’ (*Po*, 17).

68 ‘The problem with Raphaël Tisserand – the foundation of his personality, indeed – is that he is extremely ugly’ (*EDL*, 54; 53).

69 ‘protected from the world by a transparent film, inviolable and perfect […] like a shrink-wrapped chicken leg on a supermarket shelf’ (*EDL*, 99; 98).


72 Ibid., p. 76.

73 Compare the opening lines of the poem ‘L’amour, l’amour’: ‘Dans un cinéma porno, des retraités poussifs / Contemplaient, sans y croire, / Les ébats mal filmés de deux couples lascifs; / Il n’y avait pas d’histoire.’ (‘In a porno cinema, wheezy pensioners / Gazed, incredulous, / At the poorly-filmed frolics of two lustful couples; / There was no story’ (*Po*, 127)).

74 ‘He had no intention of really replying to any of the small ads; he did not feel up to a gang bang or a sperm fest. The women seeking single men were generally looking for black guys, and, in any case, he did not come close to the minimum size they required. Issue after issue, he came to the conclusion that his cock was too small for the porn circuit’ (*PE*, 101; 118).


78 In this, too, Houellebecq shares the conclusions of some feminists. Nina Power remarks that ‘Contemporary pornography informs us of one thing above all else: sex is a type of work, just like any other […] Contemporary pornography is realistic only in the sense that it sells back to us the very worst of our aspirations: domination, competition, greed and brutality’, *One-Dimensional Woman*, pp. 55–6.

79 ‘Gaping from multiple penetrations and brutal fingering (often using several fingers, or indeed the whole hand), their cunts had all the sensitivity of blocks of lard. Imitating the frenetic rhythm of porn actresses, they brutally jerked his cock in a ridiculous piston motion as though it was a piece of dead meat […] He came quickly, with no real pleasure’ (*PE*, 245; 294).

80 ‘Sexual frustration in the human male manifests itself as a dull ache in the lower abdomen as though the sperm flows up, and shooting pains towards the chest. The penis itself is painful, constantly hot and slightly sweaty’ (*PE*,
132; 154). Again, the translation here is dubious: ‘dull ache’ hardly gives the sense of violent tension conveyed by Houellebecq’s ‘crispation violente’.

81 Schuerewegen, ‘Scènes de cul’, pp. 96–7 and van Wesemael, ‘Le Freudisme de Michel Houellebecq’, p. 120.

82 ‘She could only assist, in silent hatred, at the liberation of others; witness the boys pressing themselves like crabs against others’ bodies; sense the relationships being formed, the experiences being undertaken, the orgasms surging forth; live to the full a silent self-destruction when faced with the flaunted pleasure of others [...] jealousy and frustration fermented slowly to become a swelling of paroxystic hatred’ (EDL, 91; 90).

83 Guillebaud, La Tyrannie du plaisir, pp. 87–8.

84 ‘There’s nothing more stupid, more hateful and more obnoxious than a teenage boy […] at puberty boys seem to epitomise everything that is evil in mankind […] When you think about it, sexuality has to be a corrupting influence’ (PE, 168; 199).


86 ‘it makes me furious that, as a woman who isn’t very attractive to men, I am constantly made to feel as though I have no right to exist’, Despentes, King Kong Théorie, p. 10.

87 Ibid., pp. 126–7.

88 Hakim, Honey Money, p. 1.

89 Ibid., pp. 11-12.

90 Ibid., p. 39.

91 Ibid., p. 21.

92 For one particularly visceral attack on this culture and the suffering it causes, see Laurie Penny, Meat Market: Female Flesh Under Capitalism (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011).


95 ‘A life can just as well be both empty and short’ (EDL, 48; 46).

96 ‘I never imagined that life would be so constrained, that there would be so few opportunities’ (PE, 275; 329).

97 ‘The evening is ruined; maybe the week, maybe my life’ (Po, 17).

98 ‘And it will start all over again, every day, until the end of the world’ (Po, 18).

99 ‘everything seemed normal apart from me’ (Po, 67).

100 ‘I’m no longer really here’ (Po, 71).

101 ‘Something inside me has died’ (Po, 147).

102 ‘Nobody looks at me, I don’t exist’ (Po, 165).

103 See, for instance, Denis Demonpion, Houellebecq non autorisé: Enquête sur un phénomène (Paris: Maren Sell Éditeurs, 2005), p. 196 and Claire Cros,
Notes to pages 33–6


104 van Wesemael, ‘Le Freudisme de Michel Houellebecq’, p. 117.
106 ‘Would you be willing to make love with me?’ (EDL, 148; 148).
107 ‘vile scumbags of delirious egocentrism’ (EDL, 103; 102, modified).
108 McNamara, ‘Michel Houellebecq and the Male Novel of Ressentiment’ (unpaginated).
109 ‘they were simply lacking in love. Their gestures, their attitudes, their dumb show betrayed an excruciating craving for physical contact and caresses; but that wasn’t possible, of course’ (EDL, 149; 149).
111 Éric Naulleau, for instance, writes: ‘Michel Houellebecq n’est pas un écrivain à style, mais un écrivain à thèmes’ (‘Michel Houellebecq is a writer with themes, but with no style’), Au secours, Houellebecq revient! Rentrée littéraire: par ici la sortie... (Paris: Chifflet & Cie, 2005), p. 86.
114 ‘When it comes to form, don’t hesitate to contradict yourself. Branch out, change direction as often as necessary’ (RV, 16).
118 ‘a logic of the hypermarket in which forms are all accessible and constitute so many consumer products available for instant gratification’, Robert Dion and Élisabeth Haghebaert, ‘Le Cas de Michel Houellebecq et la dynamique des genres littéraires’, French Studies 55.4 (2001), pp. 509–24 (p. 522).
119 ‘because the “reality” envisaged by scientific disciplines is revealed to be just as fragmented, contradictory and open to doubt as its literary representation’, ibid., p. 515.
120 ‘an ambivalence that is neither self-righteous nor gratuitously provocative’, ibid., p. 523.
122 ‘Their voices appeared to come from on high, a bit like the Holy Ghost’s’ (EDL, 6; 4).
123 ‘What a capacity I have for grandiose mental images, and of seeing them through! How clear, once more, is the image I have of the world!’ (EDL, 155; 154).
‘There’s something very special about this country. Everything seems constantly trembling: the grass in the fields or the water on the lake, everything signals its presence’ (PE, 292; 350).


‘It is a drama in microcosm played out between an absolute metrical structure and those textual elements which, like the poet, don’t quite fit in’, David Evans, ‘Structure et suicide dans les Poésies de Michel Houellebecq’, in Clément and van Wesemael, Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe, pp. 201–14 (p. 211).


Robitaille, ‘Houellebecq ou l’extension d’un monde étrange’.

‘Anything that contributes to dissolving boundaries, to making the world into a homogeneous and ill-defined whole, will be imbued with poetic power’ (I, 33; I2, 77).

‘The poetic experience and the neurotic experience are two paths that cross each other, intertwine, and usually end up becoming confused’ (RV, 25).


‘It is as though, on the blackest of subjects, the very peculiar quality of this grey humour were obtained through a blank [or, white: blanche] writing’, ibid., p. 34.

‘Get the hang of it on a young nigger!’ (EDL, 118; 117).

‘The objects are really there, but his reason is absent / He crosses the night in search of meaning’ (Po, 14).

Noguez, Houellebecq, en fait, p. 98. In addition, as Olivier Bardolle remarks, if Houellebecq’s style were truly ‘flat’, it would give rise to no emotion in his readers, which cannot conceivably be the case, given his extraordinary success. La Littérature à vif (Le cas Houellebecq) (Paris: L’Esprit des péninsules, 2004), p. 54.

Célestin, ‘Du style, du plat, de Proust et de Houellebecq’, p. 347.

‘My idea is not to try and charm you with subtle psychological observations. I have no desire to draw applause from you with my finesse and my humour […] All that accumulation of realistic detail, with clearly differentiated characters hogging the limelight, has always seemed pure bullshit to me, I’m sorry to say […] Might as well watch lobsters marching up the side of an aquarium […] Added to which, I associate very little with other human beings’ (EDL, 16; 13–14).
‘Of course experience has quickly taught me that I’m only called on to meet people who, if not exactly alike, are at least quite similar in their manners, their opinions, their tastes, their general way of approaching life [...] Despite that I’ve also had occasion to remark that human beings are often bent on making themselves conspicuous by subtle and disagreeable variations, defects, character traits and the like – doubtless with the goal of obliging their interlocutors to treat them as individuals [...] Certain higher management types are crazy about filleted herrings; others detest them’ (EDL, 21; 19).

‘Despite the nights when they were as one, each remained trapped in individual consciousness and separate flesh. Rollmops were clearly not the solution’ (PE, 201; 241).

In addition, Aurélien Bellanger remarks astutely that many of Houellebecq’s sentences seem to end in a phonetically awkward way which would cause the reader’s mouth to twist into a sneer or pout. Houellebecq écrivain romantique (Paris: Éditions Léo Scheer, 2010), p. 89.

‘I can just picture her breaking into sobs in the morning as she gets dressed, all alone’ (EDL, 35; 33).

‘filled with old coffee filters, ravioli in tomato sauce and mangled genitalia’ (PE, 16; 14).

‘an increased strangeness’, Robitaille, ‘Houellebecq ou l’extension d’un monde étrange’.

‘David took up jogging and began to hang out with Satanist groups’ (PE, 208; 249).

Monnin, ‘Le Roman comme accélérateur de particules’.

‘the tragic intervenes at precisely that moment when the derisory ceases to be seen as fun’ (I, 73; I2, 38/RV, 50).

Best and Crowley, The New Pornographies, pp. 192, 199.

Liesbeth Korthals Altes, ‘Persuasion et ambiguïté dans un roman à thèse postmoderne (Les Particules élémentaires)’, CRIN 43 (2004), pp. 29–45 (pp. 37–8).

‘One is never sure whether he is mocking or endorsing the remarks of his characters’, Isabelle Rüf, ‘Michel Houellebecq organise l’orgasme’, Le Temps, 1 September 2001.


Korthals Altes, ‘Persuasion et ambiguïté’, p. 43.

‘the most gifted great-grandchild of the Flaubert of Bouvard et Pécuchet’, Noguez, Houellebecq, en fait, p. 74.

‘The “I” is truly flexible. With it, you can also express, at best, what you wouldn’t want to be’, Houellebecq, in Savigneau, ‘Houellebecq et l’Occident’.


‘it’s been a while since the meaning of my actions has seemed clear to me’ (EDL, 152–3; 151).
Notes to pages 40–2

157 See, for instance: ‘Tu déjeuneras seul / D’un panini saumon / Dans la rue de Choiseul / Et tu trouveras ça bon’ (‘You will lunch alone / On a salmon panini / In the rue de Choiseul / And you will find it good’ (Po, 222)).

158 ‘You have had a life [...] Existence seemed so rich in new possibilities [...] You too, you took an interest in the world’ (EDL, 13; 11).

159 ‘You are far from the edge, now. Oh yes! How far from the edge you are! You long believed in the existence of another shore; such is no longer the case [...] The water seems colder and colder to you, more and more galling. You aren’t that young any more. Now you are going to die. Don’t worry. I am here. I won’t let you sink. Go on with your reading’ (EDL, 14; 12).

160 We can note in passing, but without lingering unduly, Jean-François Patricola’s argument that, if Houellebecq’s narrative voice and focalisation are inconsistent, it is because he simply doesn’t understand such literary principles having undergone a scientific training as part of his formal education. This view of literature as something that can be exclusively learned in school should be forcefully resisted. See Patricola, Michel Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente, pp. 169–70.


162 McNamara, ‘Michel Houellebecq and the Male Novel of Ressentiment’.

163 ‘Yes, it’s hard work, but work doesn’t frighten her’ (EDL, 27; 25). Bellanger suggests that free indirect speech is more than a stylistic figure for Houellebecq, rather it is ‘un état cognitif normal définissant une importante modalité de notre compréhension du monde et résumant notre existence sociale’ (‘a normal cognitive state defining an important modality of our understanding of the world and summing up our social existence’), Houellebecq écrivain romantique, p. 121.

164 ‘Maybe, I tell myself, this tour of the provinces is going to alter my ideas’ (EDL, 49; 47).

165 ‘my company developed an authentic enterprise culture’ (EDL, 17; 15).

166 ‘Discovering human existence / As you would lift up a bandage’ (Po, 290).

167 ‘confirmed the dinner dance as the ideal means of sexual selection in non-communist societies [...] primitive societies were brought together by feasting, dancing and the pursuit of collective trance’ (PE, 116; 136).

168 ‘From the point of view of the good of the species, they were a couple of ageing human beings of little genetic value’ (PE, 237; 282).

169 ‘Though he was surrounded by celebrities, his gaze never seemed more than indifferent. He filmed Sagan and Bardot with the same attention to detail as he might a lobster’ (PE, 29; 29–30).

170 Noguez, Houellebecq, en fait, p. 121.

171 ‘makes him look rather like a scarab beetle’ (EDL, 62; 61).

172 ‘At the next table, half a dozen Italian tourists were babbling excitedly like innocent birds’ (PE, 269; 321).
173 ‘Animal societies, for the most part are organised according to a strict hierarchy where rank relates directly to the physical strength of each member [...] Combat rituals generally determine status within the group [...] While dominance and brutality are commonplace in the animal kingdom, among higher primates, notably the chimpanzee (Pan troglodytes), weaker animals suffer acts of gratuitous cruelty. This tendency is at its greatest in primitive human societies and among children and adolescents in developed societies’ (PE, 45–6; 51).


175 On the misconception that some organisms are ‘more evolved’ than others, see Jean-Marie Schaeffer, La Fin de l’exception humaine (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), p. 191.

176 ‘What serious reasons do we have to value conscious life more highly than the lethargic existence of mussels or tadpoles? What serious reasons do we have to hold existence to be preferable to non-existence?’ Noguez, Houellebecq, en fait, p. 41.

177 Dion and Haghebaert, ‘Le Cas de Michel Houellebecq’, p. 519.

178 ‘it was mainly the idea of sleeping with a priest that excited her, that she found droll’ (EDL, 140; 140).

179 Monnin, ‘Le Roman comme accélérateur de particules’.

180 ‘The use of sex in marketing and the resulting breakdown of the traditional couple, together with the economic boom [...] coming to post-war Europe, suggested a vast untapped market [for cosmetic surgery]’ (PE, 27; 28).

181 ‘You are at one with nature, have plenty of fresh air and a couple of fields to plough (the number and size of which are strictly fixed by a hereditary principle). Now and then you kill a boar; you fuck occasionally, mostly with your wife, whose role is to give birth to children; said children grow up to take their place in the same ecosystem. Eventually, you catch something serious, and you’re history’ (PE, 24; 24).


183 ‘already betraying a hint of the dumb resignation of women’ (PE, 38; 41).

184 ‘Clearly I could do nothing for him’ (EDL, 140; 140).

185 ‘I could do nothing to lighten his burden’ (EDL, 22; 20).

186 ‘The permanent impossibility of action’ (Po, 13).


188 ‘had given [him] nothing but trouble’ (EDL, 8; 6).

189 ‘Saying you’ve lost your car is tantamount to being struck off the social register’ (EDL, 9; 7).

190 ‘these days the purchase of a bed does present enormous difficulties, enough to drive you to suicide’ (EDL, 101; 100).

191 ‘To buy a single bed is to publicly admit you don’t have a sex life, and
that you don’t envisage having one in the near or even distant future’ (EDL, 102; 101).
192 ‘the genuine modern paradise’ (I, 42; I2, 58).
193 ‘First I fell into a freezer compartment / I started to cry and was a little scared / Someone grumbled that I was spoiling the atmosphere / In order to look normal I carried on walking’ (Po, 113).
194 ‘In the most recent issue of Dernières Nouvelles de Monoprix, the accent was ever more on “real” food. Once again the editor took issue with the notion that convenience and gastronomy were incompatible’ (PE, 228; 272). This translation is, again, rather inadequate, removing the reference to ‘enterprising citizenship’ and replacing ‘fitness’ (forme) with ‘convenience’.
196 ‘Long before the phrase became fashionable, my company developed an authentic enterprise culture (the creation of a logo, distribution of sweatshirts to the salaried staff, motivation seminars in Turkey). It’s a top-notch enterprise, enjoying an enviable reputation in its field; a good firm, whichever way you look at it’ (EDL, 17; 15–16).
197 ‘I don’t know what this is but will subsequently learn that IGREFs are a particular kind of higher civil servant who are only to be found in organisations depending on the Ministry of Agriculture – a bit like the graduates of the École Normale d’Administration, but less qualified all the same’ (EDL, 58; 58).
198 ‘the École Supérieure de Commerce in Bastia, or something of the kind, which is scarcely believable’ (EDL, 58; 58). The translation is questionable: it is not that Tisserand’s declared training is unbelievable, rather that it lacks any credibility within the sector.
199 ‘Once you start work every year seems the same’ (PE, 185; 222, modified).
200 ‘He doesn’t walk down the corridors, he glides. If he could fly, he would’ (EDL, 36; 34).
201 ‘It is a very tender moment. He is leaning towards me and me alone. You’d think we were two lovers whom life had just reunited after a long separation’ (EDL, 37; 35).
202 ‘In him I discern a true professional in the management of human resources; I’m putty in his hands. He seems ever more handsome to me’ (EDL, 39; 37).
204 ‘Without projects, without motivation, incapable of communication, the depressive appears as the exact opposite of our norms of socialisation’, Alain Ehrenberg, La Fatigue d’être soi: Dépression et société (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2008), p. 251.
206 Ibid., p. 34.
207 Boltanski and Chiapello, Le Nouvel Esprit du capitalisme, pp. 235–6. Hakim’s notion of ‘erotic capital’ is also relevant here. As she notes, ‘Erotic capital becomes valuable in occupations with business-related socializing and public display, where private life is in part a public performance, and erotic capital becomes especially valuable for both spouses’, Honey Money, p. 26.
208 Boltanski and Chiapello, Le Nouvel Esprit du capitalisme, p. 506.
209 Guillebaud, La Tyrannie du plaisir, p. 478.
210 ‘a kind of “active life” of the feelings which, it too, would experience its periods of unemployment, its changes of management […] and its retirement’, Bologne, Histoire du célibat, p. 364.
211 Guillebaud, La Tyrannie du plaisir, p. 40.
212 Ibid., pp. 153–4, 165.
213 ‘On the sexual plane […] the success is less resounding’ (EDL, 15; 13).
214 ‘But in reality, above all when one is working, it’s no time at all’ (EDL, 15; 13).
215 On this point, see Boltanski and Chiapello, Le Nouvel Esprit du capitalisme, pp. 231–2 and also Morrey, ‘Michel Houellebecq and the International Sexual Economy’.
216 ‘defines his thinking precisely, in speaking to me of the “possibilities for social rapport” offered by the job. I burst out laughing, much to his surprise’ (EDL, 132; 132).
217 ‘If the simplified economic hierarchy was for a long time the focus of sporadic opposition (movements in favour of “social justice”), it should be noted that the erotic hierarchy, perceived as being more natural, was rapidly internalised and quickly became the object of a wide consensus’ (1, 66/12, 30/ RV, 45).
218 ‘The selection is brutal, without nuance or room for manoeuvre. You can either pay or you can’t. You’re either forced to sell your body or you’re not. You’re judged to be a high-return on investment or completely worthless’, Guillebaud, La Tyrannie du plaisir, p. 123.
219 ‘a game, a distraction based as much on narcissism as on sexual pleasure’ (PE, 282; 339).
220 ‘Sexual desire is preoccupied with youth, and the tendency to regard ever-younger girls as fair game was simply a return to the norm; a return to the true nature of desire, comparable to the return of stock prices to their true value after a run on the exchange’ (PE, 106; 125).
221 ‘In a totally liberal economic system certain people accumulate considerable fortunes; others stagnate in unemployment and misery. In a totally liberal sexual system certain people have a varied and exciting erotic life; others are reduced to masturbation and solitude’ (EDL, 100; 99).
222 ‘The Duchesse de Guermantes has a lot less dosh than Snoop Doggy Dog [sic]; Snoop has less than Bill Gates, but he gets the girls wet. There are two possible criteria, that’s it’ (PE, 192–3; 231).
223 For one notable exception to this rule, see Bellanger, Houellebecq écrivain romantique, pp. 94–5.
224 ‘There’s a system based on domination, money and fear – a somewhat masculine system […]; there’s a feminine system based on seduction and sex […]. And that’s it […] Maupassant believed there was nothing else; and it drove him completely mad’ (EDL, 147; 147).
225 ‘Sexuality is a system of social hierarchy’ (EDL, 93; 92).
226 ‘letting the candelabra of stupefaction light themselves in your brains, I will continue to unwind the coils of my reasoning with the silent moderation of the rattlesnake’ (EDL, 93; 92).
227 ‘the dachshund dropped off to sleep before the end of the poodle’s speech’ (EDL, 96; 95).
229 ‘Economic liberalism is an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes of society. Sexual liberalism is likewise an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes of society’ (EDL, 100; 99). Clearly the decision to render the novel’s title in English as the (perhaps) misleadingly apathetic Whatever militates against any consideration of Houellebecq as a political writer. Sweeney, too, notes ‘the tight-lipped truculence and apparent indifference suggested by the translation’ and the fact that ‘the linguistic inertia expressed by “whatever” definitively closes down the possibility of and the desire for further meaningful communication’, ‘“And yet some free time remains…”’, pp. 41–2.
230 ‘Things were proceeding as normal then. The struggle was continuing’ (EDL, 79; 78).
231 ‘At least […], he’ll have battled to the end […] I know that in his heart there was still the struggle, the desire and the will to struggle’ (EDL, 121; 120).
234 Dion, ‘Faire la bête’, p. 57 n. 14.
235 ‘could be interpreted as the opposite of what it means’, Houellebecq, in Leclair and Weitzmann, ‘Le Désir liquidé’, p. 56.
236 ‘the intuition that the universe is based on separation, suffering and evil; the decision to describe that state of things, and perhaps to overcome it […] The initial act is a radical refusal of the world such as it is’ (I, 39/12, 55).
237 All of the question, of course, is to know what kind of resistance. Bruno Viard argues that, at bottom, Houellebecq takes a left-wing stance with regard to the economy but is conservative in his views on sexuality. He suggests that
the central argument of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, while it may appear banal, is in fact highly original precisely because of this unusual combination of left-wing economic views with a conservative approach to sexuality. Viard, *Houellebecq au scanner: La faute à mai 68* (Nice: Les Éditions Ovadia, 2008), pp. 38–41. (NB this book has two titles! The cover gives *Houellebecq au scanner* and the title-page *Houellebecq au laser.*)

238 ‘the sexual model proposed by the dominant culture (advertising, magazines, health education groups) was governed by the principle of *adventure*: in such a system, pleasure and desire become part of the process of *seduction*, and favour originality, passion and individual creativity (all qualities also required of employees in their professional capacities)’ (*PE*, 244; 293).

239 ‘Back in Paris, they had happy moments together, like stills from a perfume ad’ (*PE*, 239; 285).


241 It is worth pointing out, however, that Houellebecq’s understanding of Huxley’s intentions in *Brave New World* is arguably quite wrong. Jerry Varsava insists that ‘Houellebecq’s appropriation of elements of *Brave New World* is based on a counterfactual intertextuality that radically transvalues Huxley’s insistent anti-utopian liberalism’, Jerry A. Varsava, ‘Utopian Yearnings, Dystopian Thoughts: Houellebecq’s *The Elementary Particles* and the Problem of Scientific Communitarianism’, *College Literature* 32.4 (2005), pp. 145–67 (p. 158).


243 ‘We refuse liberal ideology because it is / incapable of giving a sense, a direction to the / reconciliation of the individual with his fellows in / a community that could be qualified as human, / And in fact the goals it sets for itself are altogether / different’ (*Po*, 52).

244 ‘Because the individual, by which I mean the human individual, / is generally both a cruel and a miserable little animal, / And it is in vain that we put our trust in him unless / he is to be restrained, enclosed and maintained within the / rigorous principles of an irreproachable morality, / Which is not the case’ (*Po*, 53).

245 ‘passively caught up in the sweep of history’ (*PE*, 178; 212).

246 ‘In principle, the subtle transfer of electrons between neurons and synapses in the brain is governed by quantum uncertainty. The sheer number of neurons, however, statistically cancels out such differences, ensuring that human behaviour is as rigorously determined – in broad terms and in the smallest detail – as any other natural system’ (*PE*, 92; 108).

247 ‘If a man accepts the fact that everything must change, then his life is reduced to nothing more than the sum of his own experience – past and future generations mean nothing to him’ (*PE*, 169; 201).

248 ‘Kids are a trap, they are the enemy – you have to pay for them all your life – and they outlive you’ (*PE*, 169; 201).
Notes to pages 57–9

249 ‘The couple quickly realised that the burden of caring for a small child was incompatible with their personal freedom’ (PE, 28; 28).

250 ‘wanted to do his best for the boy, as long as it did not take up too much of his time’ (PE, 48; 53).

251 ‘might make something of his life, unlike me’ (PE, 186; 223). Similar sentiments are evoked in Houellebecq’s poem ‘Non réconcilié’ which opens with the line ‘Mon père était un con solitaire et barbare’ (‘My father was a lonely, barbaric idiot’) and continues: ‘Il m’a toujours traité comme un rat qu’on pourchasse; / La simple idée d’un fils, je crois, le révulsait. / Il ne supportait pas qu’un jour je le dépasse, / Juste en restant vivant alors qu’il crèverait’ (‘He always treated me like a rat to be exterminated; / The very idea of a son I believe repulsed him. / He couldn’t bear the idea that one day I would surpass him, / Just by staying alive when he would die’ (Po, 114)).

252 ‘I’d be heartbroken, but I think I’d probably feel relieved’ (PE, 214; 257).


254 Guillebaud, La Tyrannie du plaisir, p. 436.

255 In addition, though, as Jerry Varsava has pointed out, Houellebecq’s discourse of neoliberalism is perhaps rather overstated in relation to France especially which continues to have a sturdy system of social welfare, certainly compared to genuinely neoliberal countries like the USA. Varsava notes: ‘Ironically, Bruno Clément and Michel Djerzinski as well as Michel Renault, the anti-hero of Platform, are all in the employ of the French state, and Bruno and Renault both find sanctuary from the vicissitudes of life in state health facilities’, Varsava, ‘Utopian Yearnings’, p. 161.


257 Weeks, The World We Have Won, p. 109.

258 Ibid., p. 133.

259 ‘a disease of responsibility [...] The depressive is tired of having to become himself’, Ehrenberg, La Fatigue d’être soi, p. 10, original italics.

260 ‘But I’ve had a bellyful of myself’ (EDL, 145; 145). Jean-François Patricola notes that, for Houellebecq himself as for his protagonists, no amount of professional or material success seems to alter their fundamental state, which is more or less depressed all the time (this remains true, also, in later novels: see Daniel in La Possibilité d’une île and Jed in La Carte et le territoire). For Patricola, this apparent contradiction implies that the depression may be nothing more than a pose, a marketable trait. But why should material success cause depression to lift, if that depression is caused, in the first place, by the alienating effort of playing oneself in the arena of consumer capitalism? See Patricola, Michel Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente, p. 143.

261 ‘the passing of the pains of love simply left the field clear for boredom, emptiness and an anguished wait for old age and death’ (PE, 283; 339).

262 ‘It was disconcerting to hear other people talk about him, especially as
they seemed completely oblivious to his presence. He could almost forget that he was there; it was not an unpleasant feeling’ (PE, 42; 46).

263 ‘He had stopped wishing, he had stopped wanting, he was nowhere. Slowly, by degrees his spirit soared to a state of nothingness, the sheer joy that comes of not being part of the world. For the first time since he was 13, Bruno was happy’ (PE, 131; 154).

264 ‘Calmly, without a moment’s hesitation, he turned and walked towards the second sphere’ (PE, 236; 282).

265 ‘It is enough, literally, to be still for a few seconds’ (l, 80/l2, 45/RV, 55).


‘Maybe a step in the direction of liberation today involves the possibility of slowing down the pace of connections, without thereby fearing that one no longer exists for others or sinking into oblivion and, ultimately, “exclusion”; of deferring engagement in a project or publishing a work, and instead sharing it – for example, in an exhibition or at a conference – without thereby seeing the recognition to which one believes one is entitled appropriated by another; of lingering over an ongoing project, whose full potential one had not realized at the outset; of putting off the moment of the test and, more generally perhaps, not abolishing tests – which would be bound to provoke feelings of injustice – but spacing them out’, Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliot (London and New York: Verso, 2005), p. 468.

267 ‘we must each behave in such a way that another being’s happiness is dependent upon our existence’ (l, 41/l2, 57).

268 ‘the only superiority I recognise is that of goodness’ (l, 41/l2, 57).

269 ‘In general, such human beings are invariably women’ (PE, 91; 107).

270 ‘Sometimes women were so compassionate; they met aggression with empathy, cynicism with tenderness’ (PE, 134; 158).

271 ‘Amid the carnage and brutality which was the lot of animals, the only glimmer of altruism was the maternal instinct, which had gradually evolved into mother love […] women were indisputably better than men’ (PE, 164; 195–6).


273 ‘men aren’t capable of love; the emotion is completely alien to them’ (PE, 168; 200).


276 Ibid., p. 170.

277 See Argand, ‘Michel Houellebecq’.

Notes to pages 62–8


‘The decline of work, the decline of the family? Good news! Virility automatically called into question as a result? More good news! We’ve had it up to here with all that bullshit’, Despentes, King Kong Théorie, pp. 155–6.

Chapter two


5 ‘a temp, work experience maybe, someone pretty insignificant at any rate’ (P, 22; 16).

6 The English translation here gives ‘a feeling of irrational, abnormal pity’, but I would argue that the context implies rather a feeling of warmth (P, 19; 13).

7 ‘You could imagine him eagerly throwing himself into each new day, leaping out of bed, doing half an hour on an exercise bike before driving to the office in his spanking new Mercedes, listening to the financial news’ (P, 267–8; 277).

8 ‘His ambition existed in its own right, it couldn’t be pinned down to one specific source […] In reality, Jean-Yves worked because he had a taste for work; it was something both mysterious and clear’ (P, 296; 307–8).

9 ‘what an unskilled worker in western Europe could expect for a lifetime of work’ (P, 28; 24).

10 ‘that’s the capitalist principle: if you don’t move forward, you’re dead’ (P, 189; 195).

11 ‘I don’t know how to get out. Just once, we should take time to think; but I don’t know when we’ll be able to take time to think’ (P, 158; 163).

12 ‘The only thing the western world has to offer is designer products’ (P, 317; 328).

13 From the belief that ‘un autre monde est possible’ (‘another world is possible’).


15 ‘a kind of picaresque figure traversing a capitalist universe that exerts

16 Sweet, ‘Absentminded Prolepsis’.
17 ‘I realize that I’m not alone in being depressionist – our whole era is’ (EP, 67; 63, original emphasis).
19 ‘if, for example, a foreign power were to impose a blockade, […] no one] I knew would have been capable of getting industrial production up and running again […] We lived in a world made up of objects whose manufacture, possible uses and functions were completely alien to us’ (P, 217; 225). The translation somewhat misrepresents the more philosophical tone of the French original: Michel is not unaware of the ‘uses and functions’ of these objects, but rather of the process by which they came to be in the first place.
20 MacCannell, The Tourist, p. 36.
21 ‘The minute they have a couple of days of freedom, the inhabitants of western Europe dash off to the other side of the world […] they behave – literally – like escaped convicts’ (P, 31; 27).
24 ‘a forty-something civil servant on holiday, trying to pretend he’s young’ (P, 43; 39).
25 The English translation alters the syntax here and perhaps loses some of the comic impact of Houellebecq’s phrase, which hyperbolically implies that the couples are acting as they would ‘in any emergency’.
26 ‘My holiday had “gone smoothly”. The tour had been “cool” but with a hint of adventure; it lived up to the description in the brochure’ (P, 128; 130).
29 Ibid., p. 3.
30 Ibid., p. 10.
31 ‘One didn’t need to ask what she thought about French tourists who couldn’t leave the country without their drop of wine’ (P, 73; 70).
32 ‘belly-aching bastards whose goal was to spoil every little pleasure on offer to tourists, whom they despised’ (P, 54; 51).
35 ‘What did she mean by that? Everything is touristy. Once again, I stopped myself from putting my fist through her fucking face’ (P, 52; 48). The comic tone of the exchange is augmented by the ironic grandiosity of the ‘ondulation quasi racinienne du bras’ with which Josiane accompanies her remark (‘curving her arm like an actress playing Racine’).
38 Christopher Lasch’s The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995) is quoted in Granger Remy, ‘Le tourisme est un posthumanisme’, p. 283, but the phrase ‘touristic approach to morality’, so far as I can make out, is Granger Remy’s own.
40 Ibid.
41 Chris Ryan and C. Michael Hall, Sex Tourism: Marginal People and Liminalities (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 29. It is also the female body, we might note in passing, that is used to represent the pleasure of reading Houellebecq, at least in the cover design of the English translations of his novels.
43 Bishop and Robinson, Night Market, p. 165.
44 In Chapter 1, we noted the proximity between Houellebecq’s sexual–economic analyses and Catherine Hakim’s theory of ‘erotic capital’. Intriguingly, Hakim also comes close to sharing some of Houellebecq’s conclusions in Plateforme, although she certainly never presents sex tourism as inevitable or even acceptable. She writes: ‘Although it remains to be proven by future studies, my conclusion is that the male sex deficit is largest in the Protestant Anglo-Saxon countries. This would explain why these countries generate so many of the customers for sex tourism in countries with a less castrating attitude to sexuality. The Puritan ethic did a lot more than promote capitalism. It seems to have ruined sex for a lot of people in the western world’, Catherine Hakim, Honey Money: The Power of Erotic Capital (London: Allen Lane, 2011), p. 68.
45 ‘you have several hundred million westerners who have everything they could want but no longer manage to obtain sexual satisfaction [...] On the other hand, you have several billion people [...] who have nothing left to sell except their bodies and their unspoiled sexuality [...] it’s an ideal trading opportunity. The money you could make is almost unimaginable [...] there isn’t a single economic sector that is comparable’ (P, 234; 242).
Notes to pages 76–80

47 Granger Remy, ‘Le tourisme est un posthumanisme’, p. 286.


50 Natasha Walter suggests that this is already happening. She notes that apparently ‘innocent’ adult entertainments like lap-dancing are often closer to hands-on sex work than many of us would like to believe; that glamorous accounts of prostitution in popular fiction and television are normalising it as an ‘aspirational activity’ for young women; and that reports suggest increasing numbers of men are visiting prostitutes, or at least are more ready to admit as much. See Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism (London: Virago, 2011), pp. 39–62.


52 Bishop and Robinson, Night Market, p. 11.


54 Bishop and Robinson, Night Market, p. 87. In their book, Bishop and Robinson describe in detail the way in which systematic state neglect of rural agriculture in Thailand has forced poor families from the countryside to send their young daughters to the city to work in the sex industry. Young women are often placed under contract to a bar owner in exchange for a sizeable loan to the family, and then kept in indentured labour through extortionate rates of interest.

55 Ryan and Hall, Sex Tourism, p. 55.

56 Houellebecq’s contemporary on the French literary scene, Virginie Despentes, has admitted to taking this attitude toward prostitution in King Kong Théorie (Paris: Grasset, 2006), pp. 61–92.

57 Bishop and Robinson, Night Market, p. 126.


60 Bishop and Robinson, Night Market, p. 98.

61 Ibid., p. 8

62 Ibid., p. 75.

63 ‘the basic price is always pretty much the same: the amount westerners are prepared to pay’ (P, 207; 214).

64 ‘And the nude slaves imbued with fragrance...’ (P, 246; 254). The line is taken from Baudelaire’s poem ‘La Vie antérieure’.

65 ‘I slipped a hand under her skirt and stroked her arse as though to protect her’ (P, 114; 115).

66 Bishop and Robinson, Night Market, p. 89.

68 ‘What is really at stake in racial struggles [...] is competition for the cunts of young women’ (*P*, 114; 114).

69 I follow Alec Hargreaves in placing ‘race’ in inverted commas to indicate the suspicion with which the very concept should be treated. As Hargreaves points out, ‘there is now broad agreement among scholars that the idea of biologically distinct races of human beings has no scientific foundation. “Racial” categories are not, as the expression may unfortunately be taken to imply, objective facts but products of racialization’, Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France: Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 33.

70 ‘If I had had a gun, I would have shot him without a second thought’ (*P*, 25; 20).

71 ‘Islam had wrecked my life, and Islam was certainly something which I could hate’ (*P*, 338; 349).


74 ‘they encourage each other’s stupidity. They get blind drunk on pastis and all the while they strut around like the guardians of the one true faith’ (*P*, 27; 22).

75 ‘Islam could only have been born in a stupid desert, among filthy Bedouins who had nothing better to do [...] than bugger their camels’ (*P*, 243–4; 251).

76 ‘the paradise promised by the prophet already existed here on earth [...] all you needed was satellite TV’ (*P*, 338–9; 350).


79 ‘Respect has become compulsory, even for the most immoral and stupid of cultures’ (*I*, 193). We can see, here, the proximity of Houellebecq’s position to that of Christopher Lasch, cited at n. 38, above.


81 ‘It’s possible to live among the Chinese for years without understanding anything about the way they live’ (*P*, 261; 269).

82 ‘to give credence to the myth that you can even see people swimming in January’ (*L*, 15; 12).

83 ‘an absurd country in steep decline; it is a country which should never have existed’ (*L*, 30; 33).

84 ‘not even a country, more an assortment of dummy companies scattered over parkland, nothing but PO boxes for companies with a taste for tax evasion’ (*L*, 29; 32).


87 Ni Loingsigh, ‘Tourist Traps’, p. 82.


91 Redonnet is quoted in Cruickshank, Fin de millénaire French Fiction, p. 165. Houellebecq has been, one might say, predictably vocal in his opposition to political correctness: ‘Ce qui est terrible, c’est à quel point on ne peut plus rien dire … Nietzsche, Schopenhauer et Spinoza ne passeraient plus aujourd’hui. Le politiquement correct, tel qu’il est devenu, rend inacceptable la quasi-totalité de la philosophie occidentale. De plus en plus de choses deviennent impossibles à penser. C’est effrayant’ (‘What’s terrible is the extent to which things can no longer be said … Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Spinoza wouldn’t be allowed today. Political correctness, in its current state, renders practically all of western philosophy unacceptable. More and more things are becoming impossible to think about. It’s frightening’ (I2, 204)).

92 Cruickshank, Fin de millénaire French Fiction, p. 166.

93 ‘All it promises is that I’ll be able to go on being fucked off, or that I’ll be able to buy more Ralph Lauren sweaters’ (I2, 205).

94 ‘I will have been a mediocre individual in every possible sense’ (P, 350; 361).


98 ‘Clearly there had to be whole sectors of society who were still alien to me’ (P, 263; 272).

99 ‘It’s easier than you would think to attain the universal by talking about oneself’ (I2, 212).

100 John McCann, ‘La lutte des discours: Plateforme de Michel Houellebecq’, in Clément and van Wesemael, Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe, pp. 367–77 (pp. 370–1).

101 ‘a hostile territory bristling with absurd and humiliating bans […] a territory in which I am deeply unwelcome, in which I have no place, in which nothing interesting or pleasant can happen to me’ (EP, 86; 82).

102 ‘outside certain very touristy zones like the Provençal hinterland or the Dordogne, the inhabitants of rural zones are generally inhospitable, aggressive and stupid […] To the question of knowing when a stranger could be accepted in a French rural zone, the response was: never’ (CT, 393; 278).
103 ‘He was tempted in this house to believe in things like love, the reciprocal love of the couple that irradiates the walls with a certain warmth, a gentle warmth that passes on to future occupants, bringing peace to their soul’ (CT, 57; 33).

104 ‘for the first time in France since Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the countryside had become trendy again’ (CT, 87; 54).

105 ‘a vintage, even hard-core, gastronomic experience’ (CT, 95; 60). Houellebecq’s use of English terms here is clearly very deliberate, designating an international marketplace in which terms more usually associated with hedonistic pursuits like motoring and pornography become attached to food in order to imply a superior plane of consumer thrill.

106 ‘here, manifestly, they didn’t take heritage lightly’ (CT, 246; 167).


108 ‘The flat, isometric surface of the map was substituted by an abnormal topography where Shannon was closer to Katowice than to Brussels, to Fuerteventura than to Madrid’ (CT, 148; 98).

109 ‘From what he had been able to observe, the existence of men was organised around work, which occupied most of life’ (CT, 102–3; 65).

110 ‘It’s his place in the productive process, and not his status as reproducer, that above all defines western man’ (CT, 154; 101).

111 ‘Jed felt an obscure sense of human disappointment at the idea of this man abandoning plumbing, a noble craft, to rent out noisy and stupid machines to stuck-up rich kids living in the rue de la Faisanderie’ (CT, 27–8; 12).


113 Ibid., p. 104.


116 ‘while I’ve been photographed thousands of times, if there’s an image of me, just one, that will last for the centuries to come, it will be your painting’ (CT, 173; 114).

117 ‘to be an artist, in his view, was above all to be someone submissive. Someone who submitted himself to mysterious, unpredictable messages, that you would be led, for want of a better word and in the absence of any religious belief, to describe as intuitions, messages which nonetheless commanded you in an imperious and categorical manner, without leaving the slightest possibility of escape – except by losing any notion of integrity and self-respect’ (CT, 104; 66). The character Houellebecq offers a similar sense of the artist submitting to voices of mysterious provenance when he says ‘On ne décide jamais soi-même de l’écriture d’un livre’ (‘You never decide to write a novel’, CT, 245; 166).
118 ‘the great painters of the past were considered such when they had developed a world view that was both coherent and innovative’ (CT, 36; 19). The latter part of the French quotation – ‘They were even more highly esteemed as painters when their world view also appeared exhaustive’ – is omitted from the published English translation.


120 Ibid., p. 3.

121 Ibid., p. 4.

122 ‘you might think that the need to express yourself, to leave a trace in the world, is a powerful force, yet in general that’s not enough. What works best, what pushes people most violently to surpass themselves, is still the pure and simple need for money’ (CT, 43; 23).

123 ‘An object is easier to store and resell than an installation or a performance’ (CT, 145; 96).

124 ‘It was quite depressing to fall back in the end on the most widespread, universal criminal motivation: money’ (CT, 354; 248).

125 ‘As if the fact that he had come to photograph these objects for a purely professional and commercial aim invalidated any possibility of using them in a creative project’ (CT, 50; 28).

126 ‘you were living in an ideologically strange period, where everyone in western Europe seemed persuaded that capitalism was doomed, and even doomed in the short term, that it was living through its very last years, without, however, the ultra-left parties, managing to attract anyone beyond their usual clientele of spiteful masochists’ (CT, 382–3; 269–70).

127 ‘the perishable and transitory nature of any human industry […] the generalised annihilation of the human species’ (CT, 414; 291).


129 Ibid., p. 283.

130 ‘the author appears to be in a trance, possessed by a fury that some have not hesitated to describe as demonic’ (CT, 180; 119).

131 ‘certain archival ethnological images taken during voodoo ceremonies’ (CT, 181; 120).

132 ‘never had he regarded himself, even remotely worthwhile as an artistic subject’ (CT, 398; 281).

133 ‘a loner with strong misanthropic tendencies: it was rare for him even to say a word to his dog’ (CT, 124; 81).

134 ‘I’ve been shamefully abandoned by science’ (CT, 173; 114).

135 ‘my life is coming to an end, and I am disappointed. Nothing I’d hoped for in my youth has happened’ (CT, 252; 171).

136 ‘Now I have the slight impression you’re playing; your own role…’ (CT, 141; 93).

137 For some reason, this supplementary self-deprecating remark is omitted from the published English translation.
138 ‘There’s nothing more stupid than a sheep’ (CT, 134; 88).
139 ‘it’s one of the best poems ever written about Plato’s philosophy – and probably also about dogs’ (CT, 249; 169).
141 ‘a sort of Sartre of the 2010s’ (CT, 126; 83).
143 Ibid., pp. 29–30.
144 Ibid., pp. 235–8.
145 Ibid., pp. 238–44.
147 Ibid., p. 13.
148 Ibid., p. 23.
149 Ibid., pp. 13–14.
151 Pierre Mérot, *Arkansas* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2008), p. 132. Curiously, Madonna also looms large in Djian’s *Vers chez les blancs*: Patrick Vandhoeren, a long-time fan of the singer, is desperate to organise a meeting with her once he becomes a celebrity, but instead is tricked into falling for a lookalike.
152 ‘a general impression of dressed-up mediocrity, of facile underachievement, of an aesthetic of contempt’, Mérot, *Arkansas*, p. 27.
153 ‘therefore wrote bad books so that people would be interested in him’, ibid., pp. 198–9.
154 ‘Contrary to what people may think, he reached out to his fellow men. He observed the world […] He joined in with the crowd while I just grumble in my corner’, ibid., p. 87.
155 ‘people resemble one another more than is normally said’ (CT, 171; 113).
156 ‘a small sickly thing, thin and almost hunchbacked […] this poor little runt of a woman, with her unexplored vagina’ (CT, 76; 46).
157 ‘That hole she had at the base of her belly [that] must appear so useless to her’ (EDL, 47;44).
158 ‘Certainly, he was quite a pretty boy, but of a small and slim kind not generally sought out by women. The image of the virile brute who is good in bed had been coming back in force recently…’ (CT, 70; 42).
159 ‘There is perhaps no music that better expresses than Franz Liszt’s last pieces of chamber music that funereal and gentle feeling of the old man whose friends are all dead, who in some way already belongs to the past and who in turn feels death approaching, who sees it as a sister, a friend, the promise of a return to the childhood home’ (CT, 283; 196).

‘that mixture of deceit and laziness which sums up the professional behaviour of a lawyer’ (CT, 284; 196).

‘The fear of the gendarme [...] was undoubtedly the true basis of human society’ (CT, 284; 197).

‘even more submissive, gentle, joyful and pure’ (CT, 293; 202).

‘the source of all conflict, of all massacres and suffering’ (CT, 293; 203).

‘what remains to be said, by the unfortunate press, when even the commentaries on the author are included in the book?’, François Reynaert, ‘Scènes de la vie de Prozac’, Le Nouvel Observateur, 23–29 September 2010, p. 20.

‘self-disgust is an efficient protection for him, because no one can hate Houellebecq as much as he does’, Nancy Huston, Professeurs de désespoir (Paris: Babel, 2005), p. 285.

Chapter Three

1 Denis Demonpion points out that the book was ignored by critics and sold poorly until Houellebecq met with success through his novels. See Houellebecq non autorisé: Enquête sur un phénomène (Paris: Maren Sell Éditeurs, 2005), p. 142. Jean-François Patricola, meanwhile, more or less accuses Houellebecq of plagiarism, noting that much of the material in H. P. Lovecraft is borrowed without acknowledgement from the issue of Cahiers de l’Herne devoted to the American writer. See Michel Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente (Paris: Éditions Écriture, 2005), pp. 117–19. But, leaving aside the fact that referencing is not infrequently a rather hit-and-miss affair in French monographs, this is to disregard the genre of Houellebecq’s book, which seeks to be neither a scholarly essay nor a biography but rather a homage from one writer to another.

2 ‘In hindsight, it seems to me I wrote this book as a sort of first novel. A novel with a single character’ (HPL, 6; 23).

3 ‘There is something not really literary about Lovecraft’s work’ (HPL, 22; 34).

4 ‘For him, hatred of life precedes all literature’ (HPL, 54; 56).

5 ‘The value of a human being [...] is measured in terms of his economic efficiency and his erotic potential – that is to say, in terms of the two things that Lovecraft most despised’ (HPL, 144; 116).

6 See, for instance, Frédéric Sayer, ‘Horreur des villes maudites dans l’œuvre de H. P. Lovecraft’, Belphegor 13.2 (2004): http://etc.dal.ca/belphegor/vol3_n02/articles/03_02_Sayer_Lovecr_fr.html.

7 ‘There exists no horror less psychological, less debatable’ (HPL, 39; 46).
8 ‘using science’s vocabulary can serve as an extraordinary stimulant to the poetic imagination’ (HPL, 83; 74).
9 ‘Their sole function, in fact, would be to perceive’ (HPL, 75; 68).
10 ‘lay the groundwork for the stylistic explosion of these passages’ (HPL, 103; 88).
11 ‘he despised money, considered democracy to be an idiocy and progress to be an illusion’ (HPL, 28; 39).
12 Sayer, ‘Horreur des villes maudites dans l’œuvre de H.P. Lovecraft’ (unpaginated).
13 ‘Their vitality, their apparent lack of complexes or inhibitions, terrifies and repulses him. They dance in the street, they listen to music, rhythmic music … They talk out loud. They laugh in public. Life seems to amuse them, which is worrying. Because life is itself evil’ (HPL, 142; 113).
14 ‘Horror writers are reactionaries in general because they are particularly, one might even say professionally, aware of the existence of Evil’ (HPL, 144–5; 116). Patricola goes as far as to call this last chapter of H. P. Lovecraft an apology for, or justification of, Lovecraft’s racism. Michel Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente, p. 111. Demonpion also points out that, in interview, Houellebecq has commented on how he ‘learned’ from the ‘productive’ racism evinced by Lovecraft. Houellebecq non autorisé, p. 141.
15 From this perspective, Houellebecq could also be seen to rejoin the point of view of the Gnostics, as has been suggested by Sandrine Schiano-Bennis who lists the following points of contact: ‘un sentiment lancinant de l’étrangeté du monde, une révolte devant la souffrance et le mal; une déchirure absolue et irréversible entre l’homme et ce en quoi il se trouve logé – le monde – et dont la solitude hostile, portant le désenchantement à son comble, n’est pas sans évoquer les prolongements du nihilisme et de l’existentialisme’ (‘an insistent sense of the world’s strangeness, a revolt in the face of suffering and evil; an absolute and irreversible rupture between man and that in which he finds himself living – the world – and whose hostile solitude, taking disenchantment to the extreme, is not without parallels in certain extensions of nihilism and existentialism’). See ‘Michel Houellebecq: La tentation gnostique et le monde blasphème’, in Murielle Lucie Clément and Sabine van Wesemael (eds), Michel Houellebecq à la Une (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 247–57 (p. 249).
16 ‘the universe is something decidedly disgusting’ (HPL, 74; 67).
17 ‘Life is painful and disappointing […] We generally know where we stand in relation to reality and don’t care to know any more’ (HPL, 13; 29).
18 ‘Few beings have ever been so impregnated, pierced to the core, by the conviction of the absolute futility of human aspiration. The universe is nothing but a furtive arrangement of elementary particles. A figure in transition toward chaos. That is what will finally prevail. The human race will disappear. Other races in turn will appear and disappear. The skies will be glacial and empty, traversed by the feeble light of half-dead stars. These too will disappear.
Everything will disappear. And human actions are as free and as stripped of meaning as the unfettered movement of the elementary particles. Good, evil, morality, sentiments? Pure “Victorian fictions.” All that exists is egotism. Cold, intact, and radiant’ (HPL, 17–18; 32).

19 ‘Those who love life do not read. Nor do they go to the movies, actually. No matter what might be said, access to the artistic universe is more or less entirely the preserve of those who are a little fed up with the world’ (HPL, 14; 30).

20 ‘To offer an alternative to life in all its forms constitutes a permanent opposition, a permanent recourse to life’ (HPL, 150; 119).

21 ‘a profound resentment toward life’, ‘necessary to all true artistic creation’ (RV, 11). Demonpion notes that, in Rester vivant, ‘l’auteur semble littéralement mû par la haine’ (‘the author seems literally driven by hatred’), Houellebecq non autorisé, p. 133.

22 ‘Learning how to be a poet means unlearning how to live’ (RV, 11).

23 ‘You cannot love the truth and the world’ (RV, 27).

24 ‘Poetry, in reality, comes shortly before articulate language’ (RV, 15).

25 ‘Structure is the only way to avoid suicide’ (RV, 15).

26 ‘A dead poet can no longer write. Hence the importance of staying alive’ (RV, 19).

27 ‘happiness is not for you; that was decided a long time ago’ (RV, 16).

28 ‘pierced to the core by his failures, by what seemed like his wholly natural and fundamental predisposition to failure’ (HPL, 136; 109).


30 Ibid., p. 37.

31 ‘he didn’t have enough friends! he didn’t have enough love!’ ibid., p. 67.

32 A useful compendium of these references can be found in Floriane Place-Verghnes, ‘Houellebecq/Schopenhauer: Souffrance et désir gigognes’, in Murielle Lucie Clément and Sabine van Wesemael (eds), Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 123–32. In a rather mocking aside, Patricola points out one unfortunate similarity between the two men: when he died, Schopenhauer’s only heir was his dog, a fate that Patricola also predicts for Houellebecq (Michel Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente, p. 279) and one that Houellebecq himself seems to be either confirming or satirising in La Carte et le territoire.

33 ‘We remember our own lives, Schopenhauer wrote somewhere, a little better than a novel we once read’ (P, 175; 181).

34 ‘When the sexual instinct is dead, writes Schopenhauer, the true core of life is consumed’ (PI, 217; 189).

Notes to pages 122–7

36 Ibid., p. 43.
37 ‘The world is a display of suffering’ (RV, 9).
38 ‘suffer, always suffer’ (RV, 11).
39 ‘And always come back to the source, which is suffering’ (RV, 11).
40 ‘suffering is the foundational concept of Houellebecq’s ideology, from which all else follows’, Place-Verghnes, ‘Houellebecq/Schopenhauer’, p. 127.
41 Schopenhauer, Essays and Aphorisms, p. 47.
43 Schopenhauer, Essays and Aphorisms, p. 41.
44 Ibid., pp. 53–4.
46 Ibid., p. 211.
47 Schopenhauer, Essays and Aphorisms, p. 51.
49 Ibid., p. 118.
50 Schopenhauer, Essays and Aphorisms, p. 76.
51 Ibid., p. 64.
54 Ibid., p. 158.
55 Ibid., p. 162.
56 The confusion is accentuated in the case of La Possibilité d’une île, since the opening pages of the novel deliberately blur the distinction between paratext (e.g., dedication or acknowledgements) and text proper (i.e., the start of the novel’s narrative). On this point, see Maud Granger Remy, ‘La Possibilité d’une île, ou “Le Livre des Daniel”’, in Murielle Lucie Clément and Sabine van Wesemael (eds), Michel Houellebecq à la Une (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 221–31 (p. 227).
57 Some critics have suggested that this is a fate shared by Houellebecq himself. Ben Jeffery calls La Possibilité d’une île ‘an archetypal work of post-fame indulgence’, arguing that, in it, ‘Houellebecq intensified his bitterness and solipsism to a hideous degree’, Anti-Matter: Michel Houellebecq and Depressive Realism (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011), pp. 66, 74.
58 ‘a pretty abrasive humanist, but a humanist all the same’ (PI, 22; 14).
60 ‘Concerning the life story, there are no precise instructions. The beginning can start at any point in time, just as a first glance can alight on
any point within a painting; what matters is that, gradually, the whole picture re-emerges’ (*PI*, 27; 18).

61 ‘The self is the synthesis of our failures’ (*PI*, 15; 7).

62 ‘I lived in a banal three-room flat, in the fourteenth arrondissement, and I had never slept with a top model’ (*PI*, 30; 21).

63 ‘the very idea that a human being, however insignificant, could contemplate the details of my existence, and its emptiness, had become unbearable to me’ (*PI*, 133; 113–14).

64 ‘all we’re trying to do is create an artificial mankind, a frivolous one that will no longer be open to seriousness or to humour, which, until it dies, will engage in an increasingly desperate quest for fun and sex; a generation of definitive kids’ (*PI*, 36; 26).

65 ‘little animal, who was innocent, amoral, neither good nor evil, who was simply in search of her ration of excitement and pleasure’ (*PI*, 330; 291–2).

66 ‘I didn’t look at all like someone you could imagine having fun’ (*PI*, 310; 273).

67 ‘let’s just say it’s slightly sad; there are always sadder things, obviously’ (*PI*, 343; 302–3).

68 ‘the bother and expense associated with bringing up offspring’ (*PI*, 67; 54).

69 ‘On the day of my son’s suicide, I made a tomato omelette’ (*PI*, 28; 19). John McCann has suggested that we may be hasty in dismissing this line as the ultimate in Houellebecqian cynicism. He notes that, ‘as Daniel1 proclaims his indifference, his account suggests otherwise […] On a symbolic level, the eggs evoke fertility and birth […] The physical hunger that has to be satisfied is indicative that at some level he is aware of emptiness, a hole at the centre of his existence’, *Michel Houellebecq: Author of our Times* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 189.

70 ‘I had never loved that child: he was as stupid as his mother, and as nasty as his father. His death was far from a catastrophe; you can live without such human beings’ (*PI*, 28–9; 19).

71 ‘I had rejected the chain, broken the endless cycle of the reproduction of suffering, and this was perhaps the only noble gesture, the only act of authentic rebellion in which, after a life that was […] mediocre, I could take any pride’ (*PI*, 385; 343).

72 ‘pure fascination with limitless youth’ (*PI*, 41; 31).

73 ‘the only means by which they could modestly reimburse the immense efforts and struggles that were made for their well-being’ (*PI*, 212; 185).

74 ‘In the modern world you could be a swinger, bi, trans, zoo, into S&M, but it was forbidden to be old’ (*PI*, 209; 182).

75 ‘Youth, beauty, strength: the criteria for physical love are exactly the same as those of Nazism’ (*PI*, 72; 59).

76 ‘a pure and simple holocaust of each generation in favour of the one that
replaced it, a cruel, prolonged holocaust that brought with it no consolation, no comfort, nor any material or emotional compensation’ (PI, 385; 343).

77 ‘the monkey’s sense of domination’, ‘it would be stupid not to realise it’ (PI, 94; 79).

78 ‘deep, egotistical and animal determinants of human conduct’ (PI, 227, 198).


81 ‘the root of all evil was biological, and independent of any imaginable social transformation’ (PI, 155; 134).

82 ‘it was natural that it would be the most brutal and cruel individuals, having a higher potential for aggressiveness, who survived in greater number a succession of lengthy conflicts, and transmitted their character to their descendants’ (PI, 466; 415).

83 ‘bears all the hallmarks of mass suicide’ (PI, 43; 33).

84 ‘mankind’s desire to turn against itself, to put an end to an existence that it considered inadequate’ (PI, 444; 396). As Aurélien Bellanger has noted, it is almost as though, in Houellebecq’s work, evolution were something to be hated and combated because it is responsible for the evils that Houellebecq decries: individual consciousness, death, generational replacement … See Houellebecq écrivain romantique, p. 28.


86 Some commentators have suggested that, with homo sapiens, natural selection ‘selected’ the species that would put an end to its own mechanism, since arguably cultural development has become more important than natural selection in the evolution of humanity. However, Jean-Marie Schaeffer argues that this view is simply a new interpretation of the old ‘thesis of the human exception’, which maintains, against evidence to the contrary, that humans are of a different nature to other animals. The idea also grows out of the mistaken belief in a teleological direction of evolution towards ever greater complexity. This belief has its roots in anthropocentric thinking that consigns all simpler organisms to the evolutionary past while failing to notice that these organisms (e.g., bacteria) continue to occupy the planet in far greater numbers than ourselves. See Jean-Marie Schaeffer, La Fin de l’exception humaine (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), pp. 189–91.

87 Schopenhauer, Essays and Aphorisms, pp. 47–8.


92 Ibid.

93 ‘give free rein to [their] femininity and the exhibitionism that is consubstantial with [them], through all kinds of sparkling, transparent or skintight clothing that the imagination of various couturiers and creators had put at [their] disposal’ (*PI*, 123; 104).


95 ‘would have no more moral obligation towards humans than the humans had towards jellyfish or lizards’ (*PI*, 290; 256).

96 At least, this is the only lifestyle of which we are made aware in the novel. There are vague references to a ‘cité centrale’ from where new clones – of pets as well as proprietors – are dispatched as required, but there is no suggestion that the neo-humans’ lives are qualitatively different in this city.

97 ‘we know ourselves isolated but similar to each other’ (*PI*, 139; 119).

98 ‘a useless and encumbering vestige’ (*PI*, 411; 367).

99 ‘inversely, we cannot be torn apart by their sorrows’ (*PI*, 11; 3).


101 ‘all the elements seem to be in place, a new life is within reach, yet it seems as though nothing has yet begun’, Bellanger, *Houellebecq écrivain romantique*, p. 231.


103 Ibid., p. 12.

104 There is some dispute or uncertainty over the time frame here. Stéphanie Posthumus and Stéfan Sinclair argue, without citing textual evidence, that the narration of the later Daniels (24 and 25) is separated from the first Daniel’s narration by three centuries. See ‘L’Inscription de la nature et de la technologie dans *La Possibilité d’une île* de Michel Houellebecq’, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 15.3 (2011), pp. 349–56 (p. 350). Let us consider the facts, however: the neo-human race is established some time after the wars and environmental catastrophes that wipe out much of humanity in the late twenty-first century. Subsequently, twenty-five generations of the clone of Daniel have lived and died and, given the increased longevity of these neo-humans, it seems reasonable to assume that each one might easily live for 100 years. Maud Granger Remy agrees with this assessment, arguing that the temporal distance between the first and last Daniel is a question of ‘millennia’, *‘La Possibilité d’une île*, ou “Le Livre des Daniel”’, p. 221.

106 As Bellanger puts it, ‘Si le clonage est né de la peur de la mort, les clones ne possèdent plus assez de vie propre pour connaître cette peur’ (‘If cloning was born out of the fear of death, the clones no longer have enough life of their own to recognise that fear’). *Houellebecq écrivain romantique*, p. 236.

107 As Ben Jeffery comments, ‘If human nature were truly corrected, it is possible we would be unable to sympathise with, or even relate to, its products’, although he remains unwilling to accept that the neo-humans of *La Possibilité* could represent just such a ‘correction’, *Anti-Matter*, p. 63.

108 ‘sadness, melancholy, languid and finally mortal apathy’ (*PI*, 430; 383).

109 ‘my departure would bear witness to its failure’ (*PI*, 465; 414). Maud Granger Remy notes how Daniel’s departure also brings about the failure of the novel’s narrative schema. Previously, all commentaries written by the clones are assumed to be destined to future clones; but, in this case, how does Daniel write his story, and for whom? His account becomes little more than a message in a bottle. See ‘La Possibilité d’une île, ou “Le Livre des Daniel”’, pp. 228–9.


112 Later chapters of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* carry epigraphs from the Buddhist scriptures, the *Dhammapada* and the *Satipatthana-Suta* (*EDL*, 77, 152; 76, 151).

113 ‘Their voices appeared to come from on high, a bit like the Holy Ghost’s’ (*EDL*, 6; 4).


115 ‘Could Jesus be subsumed into Krishna, or perhaps into some other deity? Was Rin-Tin-Tin more loveable than Lucky Luke’s Rusty?’ (*PE*, 112; 130–1).

116 ‘brutally refuted all the mythological and religious constructs which had privileged the human race’ (*PE*, 123; 144).


Notes to pages 143–5


120 ‘the only problem is, I still don’t believe in God’ (*EP*, 143; 139).

121 ‘when [human beings] give the impression of being animated by a deep faith, by something that goes beyond the survival instinct, the mechanism breaks down, and laughter in principle is stopped’ (*PI*, 234; 204).

122 ‘the most difficult thing in the world to defeat’ (*EP*, 113; 109).

123 In the last chapter of his book on Houellebecq, Ben Jeffery suggests that living without some form of belief may in fact be impossible. As he points out, in our secular societies, the belief encouraged by consumer culture that it is possible to achieve everything you want simply by ‘having the right attitude’ or ‘working hard enough’ is structurally equivalent to religious thinking, at least if we conceive of religion from the Marxist perspective of an ‘opium of the people’, Jeffery, *Anti-Matter*, p. 79.

124 Stephen Hunt suggests, following Wallis, that a ‘sect’, like a church, regards itself ‘as having a unique grasp of the “truth” and how to gain salvation’, but, unlike a church, is not recognised as legitimate or respectable by outsiders. ‘Cults’, on the other hand, represent minority interests within existing churches or sects and, as such, do not always differ hugely in their interpretations. But many people use ‘cult’ to refer to any kind of ‘new religious movement’. Hunt argues that ‘in the contemporary spiritual marketplace cults find that members are selective in their acceptance of doctrines. Adherents pick specific elements and may even merge them with what they have acquired from other cults. Given this interpretation of cults, then, it is difficult to see them as all controlling, abusive, even threatening’, Hunt, *Alternative Religions*, pp. 18–20. In Hunt’s taxonomy, sects include Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, etc. whereas cults include Doomsday cults such as the Branch Davidians and the Temple of the Sun.

125 ‘In 1973, [Claude Vorilhon] had encountered extraterrestrials while visiting the crater at Puy de Dôme. The aliens called themselves Anakim; they had created the human race in a laboratory millions of years ago […] they had a message for [Claude Vorilhon]’ (*L*, 34; 39). The English edition of *Lanzarote* is a translation of an earlier version in which the Raëlians are barely disguised under another name: ‘Azraelians’; the Elohim are given as ‘Anakim’ and Claude Vorilhon renamed Philippe Leboeuf.

126 ‘it was the sort of thing you might find in an issue of *Elle*’ (*L*, 34; 40).

127 ‘all the same, I was having a bit of trouble swallowing it’ (*L*, 36; 43).

128 ‘When I brought Valérie to orgasm, when I felt her body quiver under mine, I sometimes had the impression – fleeting but irresistible – of attaining a new level of consciousness, where every evil had been abolished. In those moments of suspension, almost of motionlessness, when the pleasure in her body mounted, I felt like a god on whom depended tranquility and storms. It was the first joy – indisputable, perfect’ (*P*, 158; 162).
Notes to pages 146–57


130 ‘the great introductory offer’ (EP, 171; 166). ‘Produit d’appel’ designates, in marketing terms, a product whose exceptional qualities or value attract the business of the customer who may then be expected to spend more money on other products and services, in short to develop a brand loyalty.

131 ‘as of now and here on Earth’, my translation; the published translation gives only ‘from this very moment’ (L, 51; 65).

132 ‘abandon his ageing body in order to transfer his genetic code to a new organism’ (Pl, 279; 245).

133 ‘the unlimited prolongation of material life, that is to say the unlimited satisfaction of physical desires’ (Pl, 352; 311).

134 The translation rather misrepresents the mystical sense of this phrase by suggesting that ‘everything signals its presence’ (my emphasis): the immanent presence of nature has here replaced the possibility of the metaphysical presence of God (PE, 292; 350).

135 ‘In a halo of joy […] in perpetual afternoon’ (PE, 10; 7).

136 ‘Sometimes I turn on the air-conditioning in the morning and turn it off at night and between the two absolutely nothing happens’ (P, 348; 359).

137 ‘I don’t find it boring to repeat endlessly things I like doing’ (I2, 181).

138 ‘If I allowed passion to penetrate my body, pain would follow quickly in its wake’ (P, 348; 359).


140 Schaeffer, La Fin de l’exception humaine, p. 25–6.

Conclusion


2 Ibid., p. 28.

3 Ibid., p. 39.


5 ‘In most circumstances in my life, I have had about as much freedom as a vacuum cleaner’ (P, 94; 92).

6 Midgley, Beast and Man, p. 64.


8 Midgley, Beast and Man, pp. 40–1.
Notes to pages 157–62

9 Dupré, *Humans and Other Animals*, p. 129.
10 Ibid., p. 149.
11 Ibid., p. 166.
13 Ibid., p. xiii.
14 Ibid., p. 6.
18 Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future*, p. 177.
21 Ibid., p. 157.
26 Ibid., p. 66.
27 Ibid., p. 67.
28 Ibid., p. 70.
29 Ibid., p. 81.