



Michel Houellebecq

Humanity and its Aftermath

Douglas Morrey

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DOUGLAS MORREY

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Contents

| | |
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| <i>Acknowledgements</i> | vi |
| <i>Abbreviations</i> | vii |
| Introduction | I |
| 1 Sex and Politics | 13 |
| 2 Work and Leisure | 65 |
| 3 Science and Religion | 114 |
| Conclusion: Humanity and its Aftermath | 152 |
| <i>Notes</i> | 163 |
| <i>Bibliography</i> | 203 |
| <i>Index</i> | 210 |

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Librairie Arthème Fayard for *La Possibilité d'une île*;

Profile Books (Serpent's Tail) for *Whatever*;

Random House for *Atomised*, *Platform* and *The Map and the Territory*.

Abbreviations

References to Houellebecq's works are given using the following abbreviations, with page numbers provided for the French original and the published English translation where available. In all cases, whether the French or the English text is quoted, the French page reference is given *first* and the English *second*. Wherever possible, I have referred to paperback or 'livre de poche' editions of the texts, since these will be most readily and cheaply available to students and new readers.

CT *La Carte et le territoire*. Paris: J'ai lu, 2012 (first published by Flammarion, 2010). Translated by Gavin Bowd as *The Map and the Territory*. London: William Heinemann, 2011

EDL *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. Paris: J'ai lu, 1997 (first published by Maurice Nadeau, 1994). Translated by Paul Hammond as *Whatever*. London: Serpent's Tail, 1998

EP Houellebecq and Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Ennemis publics*. Paris: J'ai lu, 2011 (first published by Flammarion/Grasset, 2008). Translated by Frank Wynne (for Michel Houellebecq) and Miriam Frendo (for Bernard-Henri Lévy) as *Public Enemies*. London: Atlantic Books, 2011

HPL *H. P. Lovecraft: Contre le monde, contre la vie*. Paris: J'ai lu, 1999 (first published by Éditions du Rocher, 1991). Translated by Dorna Khazeni as *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*. London: Gollancz, 2008 (translation first published 2006)

I *Interventions*. Paris: Flammarion, 1998. Translations my own

I2 *Interventions 2*. Paris: Flammarion, 2009 (an expanded edition of *Interventions*, but some of the texts from the first volume are omitted). Translations my own

- L* *Lanzarote et autres textes*. Paris: Libro, 2002 (first published by Flammarion, 2000). Translated by Frank Wynne as *Lanzarote*. London: Vintage, 2004 (translation first published 2003)
- P* *Plateforme*. Paris: J'ai lu, 2002 (first published by Flammarion, 2001) Translated by Frank Wynne as *Platform*. London: Vintage, 2003 (translation first published 2002)
- PE* *Les Particules élémentaires*. Paris: J'ai lu, 2000 (first published by Flammarion, 1998). Translated by Frank Wynne as *Atomised*. London: Vintage, 2001 (translation first published 2000)
- PI* *La Possibilité d'une île*. Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2007 (first published by Fayard, 2005). Translated by Gavin Bowd as *The Possibility of an Island*. London: Phoenix, 2006 (translation first published 2005)
- Po* *Poésies*. Paris: J'ai lu, 2000 (first published separately as *La Poursuite du bonheur*. Éditions de la Différence, 1992; *Le Sens du combat*. Flammarion, 1996; *Renaissance*. Flammarion, 1999). Translations my own
- RV* *Rester vivant et autres textes*. Paris: Libro, 1998 (first published by Éditions de la Différence, 1991). Translations my own

Introduction

Michel Houellebecq is without a doubt the most famous living French writer. Indeed, it is often suggested that no French author has achieved such global visibility since Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Not only that, but Houellebecq is commonly regarded as the single most controversial writer France has produced since Louis-Ferdinand Céline, the notoriously fascist author of *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932).¹ Although Houellebecq's significant literary output amounts, essentially, to just five novels, published in the space of a decade and a half, the secondary literature on the author is already considerable. There are, to date, over fifteen books in print exclusively devoted to Houellebecq, together with several extended chapters in other books and a list of scholarly articles that are rapidly becoming too numerous to count. This abundance of critical interest in Houellebecq is surely a response to three interrelated factors: Houellebecq's almost unprecedented commercial success (at least within the field of literary fiction); his unavoidable presence in the French media; and, most importantly, his apparent ability to capture, in his writing, something of the mood of the times and to identify those areas of experience that are the site of most tension and anxiety in contemporary culture (sexuality, most notoriously, but also work, travel, and consumerism, as well as ageing, loneliness and depression).

Houellebecq typically gives his birth date as 1958, although his biographer Denis Demonpion insists, on the evidence of documents dating from before his literary celebrity, that the author was in fact born in 1956.² Following a short study of the American horror writer H. P. Lovecraft (discussed below, in Chapter 3), Houellebecq began his literary career as a poet, publishing a poetic 'method', *Rester vivant*, in 1991, and a first collection of poems, *La Poursuite du bonheur*, in 1992. His first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* – relating the hopeless sex life of a depressed IT consultant – was published in 1994 and became

a cult success. It was followed, in 1998, by *Les Particules élémentaires*, which confirmed his popular appeal, selling well over 500,000 copies and ultimately being translated into over thirty languages. *Plateforme* (2001) was similarly successful, and similarly controversial, for reasons we will outline below. Two further collections of poetry, *Le Sens du combat* (1996) and *Renaissance* (1999) have also appeared, and Houellebecq's fourth novel, *La Possibilité d'une île*, was published in September 2005 following an advance marketing campaign that made it one of the most significant cultural events of the year. The novel was published simultaneously, in its various translations, in France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK. In the ensuing five years, Houellebecq published little, aside from a correspondence with Bernard-Henri Lévy (*Ennemis publics*, 2008), and directed the film adaptation of *La Possibilité d'une île*.³ His most recent novel, *La Carte et le territoire*, won the coveted Prix Goncourt, the most prestigious literary prize in France, in the autumn of 2010.

How, then, are we to account for Houellebecq's extraordinary, and unrivalled, success in contemporary French literature? A frequent explanation, already intimated above, is that Houellebecq is the most precise chronicler of his generation. As Olivier Bardolle has written, Houellebecq alone 'reflète l'époque avec la même justesse que Proust et Céline en leur temps, jusqu'à l'incarner'.⁴ Bardolle goes on to suggest that Houellebecq stands out from the rest of contemporary French writing which, following the trend for 'autofiction', has a tendency to be rather narcissistic, concerned principally with incestuous tales about who's sleeping with whom, and the settling of scores within a small Parisian cultural milieu. For anyone outside this exclusive set, therefore, these works have limited interest, and they are certainly not exportable beyond French borders.⁵ *La Carte et le territoire* in part constitutes a satirical reflection on this generic tendency within French literature, as we shall see in Chapter 2. Houellebecq, by contrast, writes with what Pierre Jourde has called an 'ambitious realism':⁶ he is certainly not above settling personal and professional scores in print, and it is true that his books contain material that could be considered offensive, and even pornographic; but these elements take their place within a broader attempt to represent the reality of the modern world and are often focused around 'ordinary' people. Demonpion points out that Houellebecq engages in a detailed work of documentation in preparation for writing his novels, an approach that is not without recalling that of the great naturalist writer Émile Zola.⁷ For Bardolle, Houellebecq is such an invigorating breath of fresh air in French literature that he renders most other contemporary

French writers unreadable.⁸ But it is precisely this attitude that has angered commentators like Claire Cros, who complain at the way that Houellebecq has eclipsed the rest of French literary production to the extent that one could believe *La Possibilité d'une île* was the only novel published in France in the autumn of 2005.⁹ Michel Houellebecq is, as Jean-François Patricola comments, the 'chosen one' of contemporary French literature, and he fills that role partly because he resembles his readers: in an era of media celebrities, Houellebecq is socially awkward; at a time when only the photogenic seem to be welcome on television, Houellebecq is 'chauve, quelconque, voire laid';¹⁰ he tends to confirm the cliché according to which 'un écrivain est toujours malheureux',¹¹ yet at the same time implies that more or less anyone could meet with unexpected fame and fortune. Houellebecq's books are not difficult to understand, which, as Cros suggests, must come as a relief to the reading public after sixty years of being baffled by artists and intellectuals.¹² As Bardolle notes, Houellebecq's writing style is 'sober, simple, factual'.¹³ This undoubtedly helps him to find readers but Patricola adds that there is enough variation of register in Houellebecq's style for him to appeal equally to the intelligentsia¹⁴ (we will discuss the matter of Houellebecq's style at length in Chapter 1). Given his impressive sales, Houellebecq must attract interest from a broad cross-section of the reading public (even if we accept that 'the reading public' may represent an increasingly narrow band of the overall population), and, as Viard remarks, they presumably cannot all be perverts, though we are entitled to assume that they have recognised something of their own experience in Houellebecq's fictions.¹⁵ At the same time, we must not forget that Houellebecq is a very funny writer – Jourde calls him a 'great satirist', albeit an unusually calm and self-effacing one: 'Une espèce de Droopy du pamphlet sociologique'.¹⁶ Ultimately, we must conclude with Patricola that Houellebecq's success cannot be attributed to any one element, but to a combination of factors: 'une rencontre entre une posture, un discours, une œuvre et un siècle'.¹⁷

Houellebecq has become famous in France partly thanks to a series of controversies around his novels, which have been blown up by the French media into so many '*affaires* Houellebecq'. As this book is concerned with the study of Houellebecq's novels, and not with his public personality, we do not intend to dwell on them at any length, or to take sides in these debates, though it would be disingenuous not to acknowledge their significance in generating the Houellebecq 'phenomenon'.¹⁸ The controversy began with the publication of *Les Particules élémentaires*. This ambitious saga, relating the misadventures

over several decades of two brothers, Michel Djerzinski and Bruno Clément, led to Houellebecq being branded 'reactionary'. This was partly because the novel blames the political and social movements associated with May 1968 – a period often regarded with nostalgic and idealised affection by many French people, including those who did not live through it – for much of the current malaise that Houellebecq diagnoses in French society. It was also because the novel's proposed solution to this malaise is nothing less than genetic modification of the human species, interpreted by many commentators as a form of eugenics and therefore complicit with a fascist politics. On the basis of these views, which were to some extent confirmed as Houellebecq's own in interviews, the author found himself dismissed from the editorial board of the left-leaning literary review *Perpendiculaire*. In retaliation, Houellebecq's publisher Flammarion discontinued publication of the review and excluded other *Perpendiculaire* authors from its catalogue.¹⁹ Aside from its politics, however, *Les Particules élémentaires* was controversial because of its tendency to refer to people and organisations by their real names. As Demonpion's biography demonstrates,²⁰ much of the narrative of *Les Particules* is loosely based on details of Houellebecq's own life, and various characters, from family members to schoolmates, appear under their real names. A decade later, Houellebecq's mother, who had been hurt by her cruel depiction in the novel, published her own autobiography in which she accuses Houellebecq of being an ungrateful son who has only ever been interested in other people to the extent that he can exploit them.²¹ Shortly after the publication of *Les Particules*, the proprietor of a campsite called L'Espace du possible took Houellebecq to court for making defamatory remarks about his establishment; the tribunal rejected the somewhat hyperbolic demands to ban the book and destroy all existing stocks of it, but ordered Houellebecq to change the name of the campsite featured in the novel (which became 'Le Lieu du changement') and Flammarion to pay damages of 5,000 francs.²²

But this was little compared with the storm of controversy surrounding *Plateforme*, in which Houellebecq imagines a team setting up a series of holiday resorts catering openly to sex tourists, only to find their flagship Thai location targeted by Islamic terrorists. Houellebecq was again taken to court, this time by a coalition of groups representing the French Muslim community, and charged with incitement to religious hatred. He was acquitted and it is thought that the subsequent publicity did little to harm his sales figures, especially since, in the meantime, Houellebecq's incendiary rhetoric had seemingly found empirical confirmation in the

terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, which occurred shortly after the novel's publication. When, a year later, a terrorist bomb was detonated in a tourist nightclub in Bali, the novel's apparent prescience was further underscored. Some commentators suggested that if Houellebecq missed out on France's most prestigious literary prize, the Goncourt, in 2001, it was because awarding the prize to *Plateforme*, in the wake of 9/11, would have been interpreted as a political rather than a literary gesture.²³ The tremendous success of both *Les Particules* and *Plateforme* made Houellebecq the most bankable figure in French literature and led to his highly publicised move from Flammarion to Fayard, who published *La Possibilité d'une île* after paying a reported €1.3 million for a novel that was not yet written and including a guarantee that the new publisher's multimedia affiliates would back a film adaptation of the novel to be directed by Houellebecq himself.²⁴

But Houellebecq has not simply been controversial in spite of himself; most commentators agree that he has deliberately courted and cynically exploited this media attention. As Patricola remarks, with his use of a pseudonym, his mischievous tendency to call his protagonists Michel (in *Les Particules* and *Plateforme*), and the rather studied awkwardness of his television appearances, Houellebecq gives the impression that he is cultivating a persona.²⁵ In short, as Michel Waldberg has observed, Houellebecq's pronouncements come across as a little too strategic, a little too *posed*.²⁶ Pierre Jourde calls Houellebecq a 'prudent provocateur', noting that he rails against Islam, but is wary of attacking Jews, since anti-Semitism is treated with great disdain in French cultural circles in memory of the deportations of the Second World War. In the same way, Houellebecq might cheerfully defend prostitution while being careful to disapprove of child prostitution and paedophilia.²⁷ Similarly, Demonpion notes that Houellebecq is happy to be rude about the French travel books *Le Guide du Routard* (*Routard* decided against a court case but nonetheless made their displeasure known in print); but he stops short of associating his imagined sex-tourist resorts with a real multinational hospitality corporation, who would have the financial resources to mount a strenuous legal defence (*Plateforme*'s 'Aurore' is, according to Demonpion, modelled on the multinational Accor).²⁸

Inevitably, then, much early writing on Houellebecq consisted largely of discussions of these various media controversies and led to the division of Houellebecq's commentators into two broad camps, for and against the novelist. On one hand were those authors who saw Houellebecq as a significant new voice in French literature with an important and original

vision of the contemporary world: Bardolle, Jourde and also Dominique Noguez.²⁹ On the other hand there were those critics who saw in Houellebecq a charlatan and a reactionary whose literary talent was fairly limited: Cros, Demonpion, Patricola and also Éric Naulleau.³⁰ In both cases, as Claire Cros recognised, criticism had a tendency to become rather limited and repetitive: Houellebecq's enemies accused him of being a reactionary misanthropist while his defenders insisted that his books revealed a compassion for the world.³¹ For the anti-Houellebecqians, the author's many shocking pronouncements were designed to conceal a lack of real substance or thought as well as an absence of traditional literary *work* in terms of the crafting of sentences or the structuring of the novels. Worse still, this apparently casual attitude, this slackness of thought and style, were presented as being laudable in themselves: Patricola accuses Houellebecq of 'celebrating vacuity' and 'praising mediocrity'.³² Michel Waldberg agrees, lamenting Houellebecq's 'complaisance systématique dans le sordide, l'obscène, le graveleux', and arguing that his 'realism' becomes an excuse for inept dialogue and abject description.³³ In this context, the advantage of Dominique Noguez's intervention – although his book is, as Patricola recognises, effectively a hagiography³⁴ – was to provide the first systematic analysis of Houellebecq's style, showing how the impact of many of his ideas derives from the author's careful control of register and tone³⁵ (we will discuss this issue at length in Chapter 1).

This debate, then, concerns the early reception of Houellebecq's work and part of the problem – in the context of fervid media discussion – is the lack of critical distance or perspective on the author's work, which can only come with time and patient rereading. With this in mind, it is important to note that several of the critical works cited in this introduction (Cros, Demonpion, Naulleau, Patricola) were published in France in the autumn of 2005 to coincide with the release of *La Possibilité d'une île*; in other words, they were written before the authors had had a chance to read Houellebecq's fourth novel (since, notoriously, as part of its marketing strategy, Fayard refused to provide advance reading copies of the novel to the press). (We might add, in passing, that the publication of so many books *on* Houellebecq in September 2005 reveals their authors to be in some ways just as cynical as Houellebecq and his publishers.) This is a crucial point because *La Possibilité d'une île* is Houellebecq's longest and, perhaps still, his most ambitious novel – in many ways arguably his most successful – and must cause us to reassess with greater seriousness his overall novelistic enterprise. The addition of *La Carte et le territoire* in 2010 – in many ways equally

ambitious and marking a significant departure in terms of theme, tone and maturity – further complicates this picture.

La Possibilité d'une île returns to, but expands and develops, many of the concerns of *Les Particules élémentaires*: its central protagonist is Daniel, a successful but ageing and sexually and emotionally unsatisfied comedian; Daniel becomes half-heartedly involved with a religious cult, the Elohimites, who promise a form of immortality achieved through human cloning. The narration of the novel is divided between Daniel and various generations of his cloned successors and, as the book progresses, it becomes clear that the promise of a cloned future has become a reality with a new species of genetically modified neo-humans coming to replace a humanity all but wiped out by war, famine and environmental catastrophe. *La Carte et le territoire* follows the career of Jed Martin, a visual artist working in France in the present and near future (the novel's timeline stretches to around the middle of the twenty-first century). As part of a series of portraits, Jed meets and paints the writer Michel Houellebecq. *La Carte et le territoire* is thus both a self-conscious reflection on the process of artistic creation and a hilariously mocking self-portrait. But, towards the end of its narrative, the novel introduces a further unexpected element when 'Michel Houellebecq' is brutally murdered and *La Carte et le territoire* turns temporarily into a crime thriller.

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

In other words, Houellebecq's work repeatedly suggests that humanity is facing a crisis, indeed perhaps that it is in terminal decline and may, in due course, have to face up to the possibility of its own extinction or its replacement by a species that is somehow more efficient, or better

adapted to a coming post-sexual age. It is a central contention of this book that Houellebecq's work has a significant contribution to make to debates about the 'posthuman' which have recently animated fields as diverse as computer science, philosophy and popular culture. The popular understanding of the posthuman stems from science-fiction narratives in which intelligent machines are shown to be capable of autonomous thought, or in which cyborgs at the interface of the human and the machine endow human beings with super- or trans-human physical capabilities. Clearly the science-fiction 'Utopias' of *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d'une île* partake of such imagery with their visions of an augmented humanity that succeeds in transcending many of our contemporary social problems through genetic modification. A central tenet of the science-fictional view of the posthuman is the idea that, in the not too distant future, it may become possible to encode the contents of a human mind in digital form, store it indefinitely (including after the death of the physical body) and ultimately 'download' it into some new and improved carrier, whether that be a supercomputer, a cyborg or a clone of the original human being. (This fantasy is gestured at, but ultimately rejected, in *La Possibilité d'une île*.) However, as a number of cultural critics have pointed out, this notional posthumanism in the end betrays its all-too-human roots since it can be seen as simply a continuation of the ideals of Enlightenment humanism wherein humanity's manifest destiny is self-improvement through what are regarded as 'certain unique qualities of the human – self-awareness, consciousness and reflection, self-direction and development, the capacity for scientific and technological progress, and the valuation of rational thought'.³⁶ Ironically, then, as Neil Badmington puts it, 'the seemingly posthumanist desire to download consciousness into a gleaming digital environment is itself downloaded from the distinctly humanist matrix of Cartesian dualism'.³⁷ It is this dualism – the belief in the separability of body and mind or, to put it another way, of matter and spirit – that makes possible what Jean-Marie Schaeffer has called 'the thesis of the human exception'.³⁸ For centuries, humans believed (particularly in the west, where philosophy was influenced by Christian doctrine) that humanity belonged to a different order of being than other animals because humans were blessed with certain unique qualities (variously identified as consciousness, rational thought, or godliness) that did not exist in the rest of the natural world. This thesis was first challenged by Darwinism and evolutionary biology, before being rendered increasingly untenable, in recent decades, by developments in neurophysiology, on the

one hand, and the understanding of animal physiology and behaviour, on the other. The belief that human consciousness, intelligence and self-awareness constitute a God-given exception rather than one point among others on the evolutionary continuum now flies in the face of all accepted scientific evidence. Nonetheless, traces of this old humanism continue to inflect countless fields of discourse, including the science-fiction fantasy cited above, which implies that the uniqueness of a human mind can somehow be detached from both the physical reality of its location in a brain and body and the social reality of its learned responses and acquired culture.

There is, then, another, more rigorous interpretation of posthumanism that puts aside alarmist visions of a post-corporeal future and instead tries to accept and think through the full consequences of what Schaeffer calls the end of the human exception – the understanding that the human species is, after all, just another by-product of the long history of evolution on our planet. As Cary Wolfe puts it, this version of posthumanism ‘isn’t posthuman at all – in the sense of being “after” our embodiment has been transcended – but is only *posthumanist*, in the sense that it opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself’.³⁹ Wolfe states further: ‘to me, posthumanism means not the triumphal surpassing or unmasking of something but an increase in the vigilance, responsibility, and humility that accompany living in a world so newly, and differently, inhabited’.⁴⁰ To put it another way, we are obliged to re-evaluate our sense of ourselves, both as individuals and as social beings, together with our understanding of human history and our political priorities, when we grasp, with the clarity of scientific demonstration, that we are, after all, just animals, that our societies and cultures have come about through the interaction of our highly adapted bodies with our environment and that our complex minds are held in place by microscopic neurobiological processes that we are only beginning to understand. This picture is further complicated by the centrality of technology to human development. As Wolfe notes, the human is ‘fundamentally a prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically “not-human” and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is’.⁴¹ In this sense, the cyborgs of science fiction are not so much posthuman as simply a further development of the technological interface that has characterised the human from its earliest incarnations. Technology, or technics in its broadest sense, also includes human language, and, as we know from Derrida, far from being a transparent medium for the

expression of our innermost selves, language is a tool that distances us from ourselves even as it allows us to connect with others, that constitutes our subjectivity in and as difference. For Wolfe, then, where humanism conceived of humanity in terms of its active mastery and subjugation of the world, posthumanism identifies the human with ‘two kinds of passivity and vulnerability’: first, the fleshy finitude that we share with all other mortal creatures and, second, ‘the finitude we experience in our subjection to a radically ahuman technicity or mechanicity of language’, which is what allows us to conceptualise our own existence and mortality while at the same time consigning it to a distance that leaves it always a little beyond our grasp.⁴²

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

In our first chapter, this attempt to think the inhuman and the posthuman is brought to bear on Houellebecq’s problematic discussion of sex. Many hundreds of pages have already been written about Houellebecq’s treatment of sex, but the terms of the debate – whether the sex in Houellebecq’s novels is pornographic, or at least complicit with a culture of porn; whether Houellebecq is a misogynist – tend to overlook the true import of the question. For, concealed within this discourse on sex is a sustained reflection on our species’ unstable position along a continuum that runs from the animal, through the human, to the posthuman. It is doubtless in our sexual relations that we are closest to animals and, as with all other animals, it is ultimately

through sex that our species survives. Of course, we have known at least since Freud that human sex is no longer just a question of animal instinct, but that the instinct to mate and reproduce has become harnessed to numerous complicated psychological drives which, in many cases, decouple sexuality from reproduction. This recognition, and the concomitant evolution of morality, has rightly been celebrated by many different groups – feminists, gay people, libertarians, but also numberless pragmatic realists who would claim no such affiliation. In short, this has now become the consensus in most advanced human societies. The most fundamental (and the most disturbing) challenge that Michel Houellebecq brings to this consensus might be encapsulated in the following question: if sexuality becomes irrevocably detached from the survival instinct of a species, could this not constitute a threat, precisely, to the survival of that species? Moreover, if people actually stopped having sex, because a variety of psychological and social factors made it increasingly difficult for them to find partners, or if sex became the exclusive preserve of a tiny minority in society, ‘Un jeu de spécialistes’,⁴³ as Houellebecq puts it in *La Poursuite du bonheur* (Po, 128), are we even able to imagine the consequences? The challenge, it seems to me, is to consider such questions dispassionately, not to see in them a reactionary call for a return to family values in which sexuality could be solidly reattached to reproduction, but rather to think them through from the neutral standpoint of demographic science. Something like this struggle is going on in Houellebecq’s novels. Sometimes his descriptions of sexual misery come across as calls for change in the way we live now, a warning of the urgent need to relinquish our egocentric culture and reconnect with each other at the simple level of bodily pleasure and basic human kindness before it is too late and we lose the capacity to experience such things. This is often the perspective of Houellebecq’s protagonists. Interwoven with this, however, especially in the science-fiction frame of *Les Particules élémentaires* but, I would argue, also in many of the passages of detached narration in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, is a perspective that takes a much broader, species-eye view of our current context and that presents the decline of humanity as an evolutionary fatality over which there is little sense in being judgemental. Houellebecq’s discourse on sex, in other words, which is at heart a discourse on humanity, fluctuates between these two positions, and it is perhaps in the end this ambivalence with regard to the human itself that makes his writing most controversial, most troubling and most vital. It is therefore only through a careful attention to Houellebecq’s style in

these early novels that the real political significance of his inflammatory discussion of sexuality can be explored and understood.

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

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

CHAPTER ONE

Sex and Politics

This chapter, concerned principally with *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994) and *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998), looks in detail at the focus on sex that arguably first drew attention to Houellebecq's work and made the author so notorious. The chapter surveys the evidence for Houellebecq's alleged sexism or misogyny but argues that, in fact, the focus in his work is largely on individuals deprived of sex or excluded from the sexual sphere and that, from this perspective, the world of sexuality appears singularly oppressive. Houellebecq's world is populated principally by single people, but they are not so much 'young, free and single' as ageing, trapped and alone. His novels constitute so many portraits of sexual frustration, depression and desperation, sometimes giving rise to violence, self-harm or criminal behaviour. The chapter goes on to show how the apparent ambiguities of Houellebecq's discourse on sex are largely due to his style which is marked by a mix of genres, shifts in tone, complex narrative voices and a persistent 'flattening' effect that make it difficult to situate authorial intention. Above all, Houellebecq's narration is marked by a distance that we might identify as posthumanist in the sense that it takes a broad-scale, evolutionary view of human behaviour, but also, in *Les Particules élémentaires*, as properly posthuman, since it observes the peregrinations of humanity from a point situated beyond the demise of our species. In a final section, this chapter notes that way that Houellebecq's sexual description is always closely bound up with discussions of political economy. His novels provide a particularly astute portrayal of contemporary white-collar working life and his depiction of the stresses of this lifestyle, their link to clinical depression and their ruinous effect on social and sexual relationships is supported by recent research in sociology. Houellebecq's early novels, and related works, build a theory of what we might call the 'economisation' of sexuality (which appears as the corollary to a certain sexualisation of

the consumer economy). In places, this early work appears to hint at a politics of radical refusal of the leading ideology of liberal individualism that makes this culture possible, and the chapter ends by considering why such a refusal is never entirely clear or conclusive in Houellebecq's work.

Sex and sexism

Sex, according to a rapidly established critical dogma, is what Michel Houellebecq's novels are all about. As Sabine van Wesemael has asserted, it is 'le thème presque unique de ses récits'.¹ In the novel that made him globally famous, *Les Particules élémentaires*, sex appears as the constant obsession of one of the protagonists, Bruno, whose unfortunate peregrinations create the occasion for numerous scenes of a sexual nature. Some of these scenes are cast from a troublingly paedophilic angle. It is revealed that Bruno, as an adolescent, used to masturbate behind his school folder as he sat opposite girls on the train. As a grown man, his behaviour changes little, observing a group of naked teenage girls showering at the Lieu du Changement campsite and later masturbating to the sight of some fourteen-year-olds sunbathing. This strain of the novel reaches its climax, so to speak, when Bruno, now a high-school teacher, exposes himself to one of his students. Elsewhere, the sexual activity in the novel partakes quite self-consciously of a pornographic register:² Bruno receiving a blow job in a jacuzzi from Christiane immediately after she has satisfied another man; the foursome that they subsequently enjoy with a German couple; and the multiple penetrations that ensue when they begin to visit swingers' clubs together. As commentators have suggested, these sexual encounters are pornographic in the sense that the sex is easy and immediate, without any need for seduction, or even in some cases conversation to prepare the act.³ They are pornographic, too, in that the principal goal of these descriptions seems to be the arousal of the reader, presumed male by most critics.⁴ Victoria Best and Martin Crowley have also pointed out Houellebecq's insistent use of the key pornographic trope of visible male ejaculation, often on to the face or breasts of the female partner.⁵ As I have suggested elsewhere,⁶ by *Plateforme* (2001) this pornographic mode in Houellebecq's writing has become almost self-parodic with an ever more daring succession of encounters with exotic partners (a foursome with a black couple, another with two Thai girls; a threesome with a Cuban maid) in clichéd locations (sex on a train, in a steam room, etc.).

Perhaps unsurprisingly these sexual scenes have generated a fair amount of critical discussion and controversy. Little critical consensus has developed, however, over Houellebecq's sex, since the suspicion always persists that, behind the author's eager exploitation of questionable forms, serious points are being made about sexuality. As Best and Crowley put it, the ambivalence over Houellebecq's sex scenes arises from the fact that 'he confronts his culture's widespread sexual dilemmas and anxieties via reference to the forms this culture habitually uses to represent those areas to itself'.⁷ Thus these scenes can have a very different resonance for different readers. Murielle Lucie Clément, for instance, suggests that many of them may be perceived as erotic by male readers, but pornographic by women.⁸ For Franc Schuerewegen, Houellebecq's sexual vignettes are pornographic because they appear 'interchangeable'.⁹ For Julian Barnes, the scenes in *Plateforme*, in particular, belong to the domain of fantasy since nothing ever appears to go wrong, no one ever says 'no', and the generous oriental prostitutes all present without blemishes or blockages, with no sign of pimps or addictions¹⁰ (this representation of the Thai sex industry will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2). On the contrary, Houellebecq himself has maintained that it is precisely the lack of preparation for these sexual acts that makes them jarring for the reader, together with the fact that many of them evoke 'du sexe raté': *failed sex*.¹¹ If this is not so often true in *Plateforme*, it is certainly the case in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *Les Particules élémentaires* that sex, more often than not, is disappointing, inaccessible or non-existent, as we will go on to demonstrate in this chapter. But even where sex is inscribed apparently as a form of wish fulfilment, it remains a little too simplistic to characterise Houellebecq as a crude fantasist. Charles Taylor has argued that the dismissal of *Plateforme*'s sexually voracious Valérie as a figment of male fantasy betrays a persistent, and rather Victorian, discomfort with 'the idea that a woman's sexual appetite can equal a man's'.¹² Meanwhile, Mads Anders Baggésgaard, who has studied Houellebecq's sex scenes with more care than most critics, suggests that the author is in fact developing, across these scenes, a critique of sexual visibility, implying that sexual experience ruled by the visual sense must lead to a call for ever-increasing explicitness. Meanwhile, the characters' most satisfying sexual experiences are often marked by a suspension of visibility, as in the jacuzzi with Christiane where the water and the darkness conceal most of their bodies from view and the description becomes much more tactile.¹³

However sophisticated and thoughtful Houellebecq's dissection of sexual relations may be in places, there are, nonetheless, numerous examples of a casual, apparently unthinking, sexism in Houellebecq's writing. In the opening paragraphs of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, we find a passing remark about 'deux filles pas belles du tout, les deux boudins du service en fait' ('Nothing beautiful about this pair, the frumps of the department in fact' (EDL, 5; 3)). In *Les Particules*, a woman is rapidly summarised as sporting a 'bouche à pipes' ('blow-job lips' (PE, 109; 127–8)). Similarly, one of Michel's first observations about Valérie in *Plateforme* is that she must have 'une bouche bien chaude, prompte à avaler le sperme d'un ami véritable' ('her mouth was obviously pretty hot, just ready to swallow the spunk of a true friend' (P, 49; 44)). In the tradition of true misogynists, Houellebecq's narrators define women immediately and exclusively by their sexuality and at the same time appear angered or offended by that sexuality: 'Elles n'avaient rien en dessous de leur tee-shirt, les salopes. Bruno les suivit des yeux; il avait mal à la bite' (PE, 98; 114).¹⁴ Best and Crowley suggest that there is a degree of knowingness about Houellebecq's sexism, an awareness of 'a cultural moment of backlash' against feminism in which such material can be presented as comical where once it might just have been offensive.¹⁵ Certainly the novels will sometimes give an ironic framing to these offhand remarks, as when the omniscient narrator of *Les Particules* remarks that Bruno 'vivait dans un monde mélodramatique composé de canons et de boudins, de *mecs tops* et de *blaireaux*' (PE, 122; 143).¹⁶ Elsewhere, however, something appears to be going on that cannot be reduced to irony. Many of Houellebecq's cruelest descriptions are reserved for older women, their continued claims to a sexual existence remorselessly mocked as an offence against reason. In a nightclub with Tisserand in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*:

la fille n'était pas d'une beauté exceptionnelle, et serait sans doute peu courtisée; ses seins, certes de bonne taille, étaient déjà un peu tombants, et ses fesses paraissaient molles; dans quelques années, on le sentait, tout cela s'affaîsserait complètement. D'autre part son habillement, d'une grande audace, soulignait sans ambiguïté son intention de trouver un partenaire sexuel [...] voilà une fille qui devait certainement avoir des préservatifs dans son sac.¹⁷ (EDL, 112; 110–11)

Even Christiane is described in these terms: 'elle avait dû être très jolie; mais les traits de son visage fin étaient flétris, légèrement couperosés [...] Son mont de Vénus avait une jolie courbure; malheureusement, les

grandes lèvres étaient un peu pendantes' (*PE*, 139–40; 165).¹⁸ It comes as no surprise to learn the circumstances under which Bruno's marriage ended: 'Ce qui était bien, quand même, c'est qu'elle avait de gros seins [...] Plus tard ses seins sont tombés, et notre mariage s'est cassé la gueule lui aussi' (*PE*, 170; 203).¹⁹ There is an almost Célinean horror of loose, saggy flesh in Houellebecq that betrays, beyond the superficial misogyny, a deep anxiety about organic matter, including the author/narrator's own body. In *La Poursuite du bonheur* (1992), Houellebecq writes: 'Mon corps est comme un sac traversé de fils rouges' and 'au fond de moi je sens / Quelque chose de mou, de méchant, et qui bouge'. The same poem continues:

Cela fait des années que je hais cette viande
 Qui recouvre mes os. La couche est adipeuse,
 Sensible à la douleur, légèrement spongieuse ...²⁰ (*Po*, 117).

In the world of Houellebecq, a woman's destiny is clearly determined in advance on the basis of her appearance because, as he puts it in *Le Sens du combat* (1996), the 'advantage' of having internal sexual organs is that

tu attends toujours
 Une espèce d'hommage
 Qui pourra t'être donné ou refusé,
 Et ta seule possibilité en dernière analyse est d'attendre.²¹ (*Po*, 102)

In this sense, then, women considered ugly will literally be waiting forever. Some of the summits of Houellebecq's grim comic vision in the novels are also some of his cruellest, most misogynistic passages. Of Catherine Lechardoy in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* he writes: 'Elle n'est vraiment pas très jolie. En plus des dents gâtées elle a des cheveux ternes, des petits yeux qui brillent de rage. Pas de seins ni de fesses perceptibles. Dieu n'a vraiment pas été très gentil avec elle [...] j'ai l'impression qu'elle est hors d'état d'essayer quoi que ce soit avec un mec' (*EDL*, 28; 25–6).²² This initial description sets up the already infamous passage a few chapters later: 'Ce trou qu'elle avait au bas du ventre devait lui apparaître tellement inutile. Une bite, on peut toujours la sectionner; mais comment oublier la vacuité d'un vagin?' (*EDL*, 47; 44).²³ Another character condemned to misery by her appearance is the unfortunately named Brigitte Bardot, and in the evocation of this poor girl's adolescence Houellebecq gives free rein to his meanest instincts and his most profound disgust:

Au moment où je l'ai connue, dans l'épanouissement de ses dix-sept ans, Brigitte Bardot était vraiment immonde. D'abord elle était très grosse, un boudin et même un surboudin, avec divers bourrelets disgracieusement disposés aux intersections de son corps obèse. Mais eût-elle même suivi pendant vingt-cinq ans un régime amaigrissant de la plus terrifiante sévérité que son sort n'en eût pas été notablement adouci. Car sa peau était rougeâtre, grumeleuse et boutonneuse. Et sa face était large, plate et ronde, avec de petits yeux enfoncés, des cheveux rares et ternes. Vraiment la comparaison avec une truie s'imposait à tous, de manière inévitable et naturelle.

Elle n'avait pas d'amies, ni évidemment d'amis; elle était donc parfaitement seule [...] Ses mécanismes hormonaux devaient fonctionner normalement, il n'y a aucune raison de soupçonner le contraire. Et alors? [...] Imaginait-elle des mains masculines s'attardant entre les replis de son ventre obèse?²⁴ (*EDL*, 88–9; 87–8)

Perhaps the most damning indication of Houellebecq's misogyny, however, is that, in his novelistic universe, beautiful women fare little better than this unfortunate pair. Annabelle in *Les Particules élémentaires* is naturally very beautiful, and her sex life proves miserable for precisely that reason:

Tel est l'un des principaux inconvénients de l'extrême beauté chez les jeunes filles: seuls les dragueurs expérimentés, cyniques et sans scrupule se sentent à la hauteur; ce sont donc en général les êtres les plus vils qui obtiennent le trésor de leur virginité, et ceci constitue pour elles le premier stade d'une irrémédiable déchéance.²⁵ (*PE*, 58; 67–8)

Indeed, after an initial period of sexual activity, Annabelle withdraws entirely from sexual relations, so disappointed is she by her experiences at the hands of men.

In Houellebecq's novels, in short, women are blamed and women are punished. It is frequently women who are seen to be to blame for misfortune and unhappiness, whether their own or that of the male characters. An apparently trivial, but in fact emblematic example, may be found in the young Bruno's first ever attempt at sexual contact. When Bruno places his hand on the leg of a girl in his class, Caroline Yessayan, she wordlessly removes it. In the mind of Bruno, this incident comes to bear the full responsibility of the subsequent calamity of his sex life: 'après ce premier échec [...] tout devenait beaucoup plus difficile' ('After this first failure [...] everything became much more difficult' (*PE*, 53; 61)). But it is not only within the character's mind, but also within the logic of the narration that the event is raised in importance, with the

metonymic slippage from the text – ‘Tout était de la faute de la minijupe de Caroline Yessayan’ (‘Caroline Yessayan’s mini-skirt was to blame for everything’ (PE, 53; 62)) – to the chapter title – ‘Tout est la faute de Caroline Yessayan’ (‘Caroline Yessayan is to blame for everything’ (PE, 51; 59)) – underlining the fault of the person rather than the historically contingent item of apparel. In *Les Particules élémentaires* especially, women characters will be punished by their narrative fate for causing the sexual misery of men. When Christiane is struck with paralysis during a nightclub orgy, the plot development comes across as an almost parodic version of divine retribution for sinful behaviour. Her fate is definitively sealed when she subsequently commits suicide by throwing herself down the stairs. In a similar way in *Plateforme*, Valérie – sexual experimenter and co-instigator of a mainstream sex tourism network – is summarily dispatched at the end of the novel in an Islamic terrorist attack. But, more-modest, self-effacing women fare no better. Annabelle, having belatedly achieved her dream of conceiving a child with Michel – himself uninterested in sex – is diagnosed with cancer of the uterus and forced to have an abortion and hysterectomy before she too commits suicide rather than face the agony of terminal illness.²⁶

This same pattern of blame attributed and punishment meted out to women can be found in Houellebecq’s now-famous critique of the so-called sexual revolution and of the New Age and hippy cultures that surround and nurture it in *Les Particules élémentaires*. Houellebecq is clear that despite the post-’68 rhetoric of self-government and direct democracy the initiatives of the counterculture – such as the Lieu du Changement campsite – were mainly designed around getting laid. Similarly, for a guru of the movement like Francesco di Meola, the principal motivation was to ‘fumer des cigarettes de marijuana avec de très jeunes filles attirées par l’aura spirituelle du mouvement; puis de les baiser, au milieu des mandalas et des odeurs d’encens’ (PE, 81; 94).²⁷ In the hysterical conclusion to this hippy trajectory, Francesco’s son David will later become a Satanist and serial murderer: ‘Après avoir épuisé les jouissances sexuelles, il était normal que les individus libérés des contraintes morales ordinaires se tournent vers les jouissances plus larges de la cruauté’ (PE, 211; 252).²⁸ In some ways, then, this rather snide critique of the sexual revolution as a disingenuous invention of randy men rejoins a feminist argument. Sheila Jeffreys, for instance, maintains that the sexual revolution came about as a way of containing the threat posed by women’s greater economic power and independence.²⁹ But, on the other hand, within the discursive order of *Les Particules*

élémentaires, women are frequently seen to have no one but themselves to blame for the unfortunate fallout of sexual liberation:

les femmes qui avaient eu vingt ans aux alentours des ‘années 1968’ se trouvèrent, la quarantaine venue, dans une fâcheuse situation. Généralement divorcées, elles ne pouvaient guère compter sur cette conjugalité – chaleureuse ou abjecte – dont elles avaient tout fait pour accélérer la disparition. Faisant partie d’une génération qui – la première à un tel degré – avait proclamé la supériorité de la jeunesse sur l’âge mûr, elles ne pouvaient guère s’étonner d’être à leur tour méprisées par la génération appelée à les remplacer. Enfin, le culte du corps qu’elles avaient puissamment contribué à constituer ne pouvait, à mesure de l’affaissement de leurs chairs, que les amener à éprouver pour elles-mêmes un dégoût de plus en plus vif – dégoût d’ailleurs analogue à celui qu’elles pouvaient lire dans le regard d’autrui.³⁰ (*PE*, 106–7; 125)

As Christiane remarks, these women do not really believe in chakras, crystals and the rest of the New Age paraphernalia, but are merely trying to distract themselves from the fact that they are ‘seules, vieillissantes et moches’ (‘still ugly, still ageing, still alone’ (*PE*, 146; 175)). If such scorn is poured on these women, if their decline is related with such undisguised glee, it is largely because of the pivotal role in the narrative of Janine Ceccaldi, the mother of Bruno and Michel (and famously based on Houellebecq’s own mother, to the point of sharing her real last name). Ceccaldi is identified early in the novel as being the ‘accélérateur d’une décomposition historique’ (‘catalyst of social breakdown’ (*PE*, 26; 26, modified)). Having given birth to Bruno and Michel by different fathers, she abandons both to be raised by their grandparents while she enjoys to the full the sexually liberated existence of an affluent young woman in the western counter-culture. The implication is that Ceccaldi’s neglect is to blame for both Michel’s irreversible emotional detachment and for Bruno’s increasingly serious sexual pathology, which eventually leads to his institutionalisation. As the latter tells his mother in no uncertain terms on her deathbed: ‘Tu n’es qu’une vieille pute [...] Tu mérites de crever’ (‘You’re just an old whore [...] You deserve to die’ (*PE*, 256; 307)).

In this way, then, Houellebecq’s critique of the sexual revolution – a critique that has itself been forcefully made by feminists – becomes confused in *Les Particules élémentaires*, and much of Houellebecq’s other work, with an angry critique of feminism and feminists themselves. Through the mouthpiece of Christiane, Houellebecq’s description indulges in a mixture of bitterness and *Schadenfreude* as he outlines the trajectory of the typical feminist:

Je n'ai jamais pu encadrer les féministes [...] elles étaient littéralement obsédées par la vaisselle [...] En quelques années, elles réussissaient à transformer les mecs de leur entourage en névrosés impuissants et grincheux. À partir de ce moment – c'était absolument systématique – elles commençaient à éprouver la nostalgie de la virilité. Au bout du compte elles plaquaient leurs mecs pour se faire sauter par des machos latins à la con [...] puis elles se faisaient faire un gosse et se mettaient à préparer des confitures maison avec les fiches cuisine *Marie-Claire*.³¹ (*PE*, 145–6; 173–4)

In his more sober moments, in interview, Houellebecq has suggested that, in fact, what came to be called 'women's liberation' chiefly benefited men by multiplying opportunities for sexual encounters, and that women were the main victims of a transition to a culture ruled by the traditional masculine values of competition, egotism and violence (*I*, 116–17). However, this remark, and others like it, reveal a very limited understanding of feminism on Houellebecq's part. In his preface to a new French translation of Valerie Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto*, Houellebecq maintains that the objective of feminists was simply to achieve equality within a masculine society, even if it meant sacrificing some feminine values, an account that completely ignores the existence of more radical strains of feminist thought (of which Solanas may be considered a part) (*I2*, 166–7). At the beginning of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, when he hears the 'deux boudins du service' defending a colleague's right to wear a mini-skirt, not to seduce men but simply in order to feel good about herself, the narrator remarks upon 'les ultimes résidus, consternants, de la chute du féminisme' ('the last dismaying dregs of the collapse of feminism' (*EDL*, 6; 4)). Houellebecq is perhaps right to lament the way in which the discourses of 'feminism' have been degraded and corrupted to the point at which they serve as an alibi for behaviours that perpetuate the sexual subordination of women, a point that has also been made recently by a number of feminist writers.³² Nonetheless, the implication that tends to come through the complaint – especially in the context of a narrative voice in which women are constantly objectified and belittled – is that feminism does not mean, and never did mean, much more than this. In the same movement, the real gains of the feminist struggle in terms of women's reproductive freedom are assimilated to the purely egotistical search for guiltless pleasure of the sixties 'revolution'. In *Les Particules élémentaires*, Annabelle visits an abortion doctor:

C'était un type d'une trentaine d'années, enthousiaste, avec une petite moustache rousse, qui s'appelait Laurent. Il tenait à ce qu'elle l'appelle

par son prénom: Laurent [...] Il tenait à établir un dialogue démocratique avec ses clientes, qu'il considérait plutôt comme des copines. Depuis le début il soutenait la lutte des femmes, et selon lui il restait encore beaucoup à faire.³³ (*PE*, 86–7; 101–2)

The free indirect speech here gives a sardonic undertone to the passage which tends to dismiss abortion as just one more ploy dreamed up by men to facilitate a guilt-free sex life.

Sex and sexlessness

Let us summarise our observations so far. Houellebecq's novels, it seems, are filled with a lot of sex, much of it related in a pornographic mode. There are countless derogatory descriptions of women, and the female sex is frequently blamed, and often punished, for having caused both the individual unhappiness of male characters and, more generally, the cultural transition that has brought about difficult sexual conditions. This would, however, represent an extremely one-sided analysis of Houellebecq's work, and the reality is considerably more nuanced. First of all, it is clear that these are novels, more than anything else, about people *not having sex*. If it is significant that Houellebecq's first novel opens with a woman at a party removing all her clothes, it is more significant to note that she quickly puts them back on when she realises no one is paying attention. 'D'ailleurs,' remarks Houellebecq, 'c'est une fille qui ne couche avec personne' ('She's a girl, what's more, who doesn't sleep with anyone' (*EDL*, 5; 3)). Houellebecq's novels describe a world in which 'les relations humaines deviennent progressivement impossibles' ('human relationships become progressively impossible' (*EDL*, 16; 14)). Michel, Bruno and the narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* spend most of their time not having sex and, in the case of the latter two, doubting their chances of ever having sex again. Houellebecq frequently stresses the time elapsed between sexual encounters. One of his poems contains the line 'Cela fait plus d'un an qu'il n'a pas fait l'amour' (*Po*, 14)³⁴ while the narrator of *Extension* tells his psychiatrist that his last sexual relations were a little over two years ago. In the midst of the sexual revolution, not everybody is having sex. Bruno spends some time staying with his mother's hippy friends: 'Les vulves des jeunes femmes étaient accessibles, elles se trouvaient parfois à moins d'un mètre; mais Bruno comprenait parfaitement qu'elles lui restent fermées' (*PE*, 60; 69).³⁵ Even when Bruno meets Christiane, he finds it hard to regard this

seemingly happy relationship as anything other than ‘une mauvaise farce [...] une ultime et sordide plaisanterie de l’existence’ (*PE*, 245; 295).³⁶ The media may have picked up on the sex in Houellebecq’s novels, but the books’ most resonant message is that, actually, people are less interested in sex, and less sexually active, than we are often led to believe: ‘La plupart des gens, en réalité, sont assez vite ennuyés par le sujet [...] nous avons besoin de nous entendre répéter que la vie est merveilleuse et excitante; et c’est bien entendu que nous en doutons un peu’ (*EDL*, 31–2; 29–30).³⁷

In airing such statements,³⁸ Houellebecq rejoins the observations of an increasingly frequent strain in recent work in the social sciences, which notes that the idealised image of an abundant and adventurous sex life is very far from representing the reality of many people. Jean-Claude Guillebaud cites the results of a German survey in which one in three young people between the ages of seventeen and thirty-five declared themselves able to do without sexual relations for an extended period.³⁹ In France, 25 per cent of women and 15 per cent of men over the age of thirty-five are thought to be living without sex, and 26 per cent of this population declare themselves to be ‘indifferent’ to the prospect of not making love for several months.⁴⁰ In recent years, we have also seen the growth of youth movements defining themselves by their refusal to participate in sexual permissiveness and their deliberate delaying of the loss of virginity. As Guillebaud comments, the motivation for such behaviour need not always come from the religious right; it is sometimes accompanied by an explicit claim to a feminist heritage.⁴¹ Virginie Despentès has also pointed out that it is easier now than ever before for young women, in particular, to choose a life without sex but without, either, having to be cloistered.⁴² Researchers in the field of behavioural economics have suggested that if it is true that sexual activity is an important factor in people’s reported happiness the media’s fascination with an acquisitive sexuality where success is determined by the number of partners, is misleading. In fact, married people continue to have more sex than single people and ‘the happiness-maximising number of sexual partners in the previous year is calculated to be 1’.⁴³ (In passing, we might note, with Nathalie Dumas, that Houellebecq’s own social and economic analysis of sexual relations seems, somewhat perversely, almost to exclude people living happily as a couple.⁴⁴)

All of this may seem singularly unsurprising. So not everyone is having wild sex with multiple partners all the time? You don’t say! But there would be no need to state the obvious were it not for the fact that the

constant stream of sexualised images with which we are daily confronted constitutes a kind of sexual *injunction*. Houellebecq's work is suffused throughout with this idea, as we will continue to see below. But one of his clearest statements of the point comes in the non-fiction text 'Approches du désarroi' (1997), where he describes advertising culture as a sort of terrifying superego constantly repeating the litany: 'Tu dois désirer. Tu dois être désirable. Tu dois participer à la compétition, à la lutte, à la vie du monde. Si tu t'arrêtes, tu n'existes plus. Si tu restes en arrière, tu es mort' (I, 76; also published in I2, 41 and RV, 52).⁴⁵ Again, the notion of a sexual injunction has received considerable discussion in contemporary sociology. Jeffrey Weeks comments: 'The contemporary self is shaped in a continuously sexualising culture where the erotic becomes meaningful for a sense of who and what you are'.⁴⁶ Jean-Claude Guillebaud talks of the 'tapage sexuel' or sexual racket in which the fevered discussion of sexuality has become the constant background noise of our daily lives.⁴⁷ In an imperceptible but sinister shift, the idea of a sexual happiness to which everyone has a right to aspire comes to be seen almost as a public health problem in which each individual subsequently has the duty to make the most of their sexuality.⁴⁸ For Sheila Jeffreys, this was the consequence of the sexual revolution: not having or not enjoying sex came to be seen as unacceptable. A woman who did not want, or did not like sex was assumed to be 'old-fashioned, narrow-minded and somehow psychologically damaged'.⁴⁹ Sex is henceforth mandatory and a degree of efficiency and expertise is expected of all. In this context, suggests Guillebaud, pleasure threatens to become a chore.⁵⁰ And, once again, it is women who bear the brunt of the transition. As Despentès comments, the female orgasm entered mainstream popular discourse in the 1970s in the form of an imperative – one more thing for women to feel inadequate about.⁵¹ Jean Claude Bologne proposes that – although it would be impossible to estimate their statistical significance – there may be a new class of single people who shun sexual contact out of a sense of inadequacy, a fear of disappointing potential partners.⁵² Again, such a phenomenon is likely to be more marked among women since the sexual revolution and its aftermath remains characterised by distinctly masculine values: promiscuity, emotional detachment, objectification of bodies, genital sexuality ...⁵³ Nor should we forget that the possibility of creating one's ideal sex life is made more or less easy, not only by the vagaries of physical appearance and psychological make-up, but also by historical contingencies of geographical, class and ethnic background. 'For many,' writes Jeffrey Weeks, 'their identities and lifestyles are still

fates, not opportunities, while more radically different, and transgressive lifestyles remain largely confined to more liberal metropolitan areas'.⁵⁴

Another consequence of this sexualised culture in which nubile young bodies are on constant display, whether on screen or on the street, is a certain stigmatisation of ageing. As Houellebecq writes, 'Dans un monde qui ne respecte que la jeunesse, les êtres sont peu à peu *dévorés*' (PE, 112; 131).⁵⁵ We will discuss this point in more detail below, and again in Chapter 3 in relation to *La Possibilité d'une île* (2005), where it becomes a key theme and structuring element to the novel. But already in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* we are told of a pensioner who has undergone involuntary euthanasia at the hands of medical staff after being seriously injured in an assault. As we have already seen, both Christiane and Annabelle in *Les Particules* commit suicide after becoming ill or disabled. For Houellebecq, this has become the new logic of the adult life course: each individual is invited to make a cynical calculation that will identify the moment when

la somme des jouissances physiques qui lui restent à attendre de la vie deviendra inférieure à la somme des douleurs [...] Cet examen rationnel des jouissances et des douleurs, que chacun, tôt ou tard, est conduit à faire, débouche inéluctablement à partir d'un certain âge sur le suicide [...] plus généralement les suicides de personnes âgées, de loin les plus fréquents, nous paraissent aujourd'hui absolument logiques.⁵⁶ (PE, 247–8; 297)

Growing older, in the world of Houellebecq, means entering a life of sexlessness and shame, especially for women: 'pour les femmes, dans la quasi-totalité des cas, les années de la maturité furent celles de l'échec, de la masturbation et de la honte' (PE, 107; 126).⁵⁷ But if some older men are still capable of having relations with younger women, they are always in danger of being branded as paedophiles, the latest moral panic and the most in keeping with the culture's worship of youth: 'Tout ça par haine des vieux, par haine et par dégoût de la vieillesse, c'était en train de devenir une cause nationale' (PE, 198; 237–8).⁵⁸ For Jean-Claude Guillebaud, the paedophile is the perfect scapegoat for our society, as a character who seems to have taken literally all of the sexual licence that is so insistently broadcast as fantasy and, as such, the paedophile bears the weight of a society's collectively felt, but no longer publicly confessed, guilt.⁵⁹

As should be obvious from the foregoing, Houellebecq's novels are principally populated by single people. In most literature, from folk tales

onwards, being single is usually regarded as only a temporary status, with the narrative moving ineluctably towards the hero or heroine's necessary enclosure within a couple. In contemporary fiction, the most prominent images of single people are perhaps provided by the so-called 'chick-lit' novels written by and for women. These books have arguably gone some way to undoing the teleological narratives of the traditional romance genre. But, in this case, if being single does not always mean yearning for Mr Right, it is likely to mean enjoying a free, active and varied sex life. Rochelle Mabry quotes the promotional blurb for a series of contemporary romances published by Harlequin: 'these books say I'm single, I'm female and I'm having a really good time (despite what my mother may have told you)'.⁶⁰ Yet, even here, many of the most popular examples of chick-lit, such as the cross-media cycles of *Bridget Jones* or *Sex and the City*, conclude with long-sought and idealised couplings, implying that 'the real point of the [narrative] has been to place these sexually powerful, economically independent women in traditional heterosexual relationships'.⁶¹ And, as Jean Claude Bologne points out, these Anglo-Saxon examples frequently carry the message that simply by *being themselves* these women will escape from their single status⁶² (the implication clearly being that for a woman to have a large and non-exclusive sexual appetite is somehow not natural).

For some people, however, the fact of being single persists until it becomes a permanent condition and, in such cases, there is usually considerable stigma attached. As Bologne has shown in his history of single people, such individuals have, over the course of the centuries, been subject to numerous prejudices and discriminations. This is often because their single status is assumed to be freely chosen and therefore revealing the individual to be egotistical, antisocial or impotent.⁶³ Long-standing literary clichés of single people include the dried-up old maid and the older single man, now mocked for his continued pursuit of young women and condemned to live with his regrets.⁶⁴ But, although such factors are absent from statistics,⁶⁵ there is no doubt that some long-term single people live alone, not out of choice, but because they lack the physical charm or psychological make-up: they have never developed the social status or interpersonal skills necessary to establish and maintain a relationship.

These are the type of people that populate Houellebecq's novels. As Liam McNamara has suggested, these novels can be seen as 'a response to ideologies of "consumer coupledness" and "chick-lit"'.⁶⁶ What is on display here is not the independent, sexually confident lifestyles

of the voluntarily single, but the unfashionable, uncomfortable lives of the terminally lonely. These are not people who have chosen to be single, rather they have had that status imposed upon them for reasons they cannot fully understand or control. As the narrator of one of Houellebecq's poems puts it: 'Pourquoi [...] mon regard fait-il fuir les femmes? Le jugent-elles implorant, fanatique, coléreux ou pervers? Je ne le sais pas, je ne le saurai probablement jamais; mais ceci fait le malheur de ma vie' (*Po*, 17).⁶⁷ Bruno or the narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* could say the same thing (indeed, in Philippe Harel's 1999 film adaptation of the novel, these lines are added to the narrator's voiceover). So too could Raphaël Tisserand, object of one of Houellebecq's most tragic portrayals of single men. The narrator is brutally frank about Tisserand's case: 'Le problème de Raphaël Tisserand – le fondement de sa personnalité, en fait – c'est qu'il est très laid' (*EDL*, 54; 53).⁶⁸ He creates a kind of 'répulsion involontaire' ('involuntary repulsion' (*EDL*, 59; 59)) among women. So much so that he is effectively condemned to be cut off from meaningful social interaction, as though he were 'protégé du monde par une pellicule transparente, inviolable, parfaite', or, as Tisserand puts it, like 'une cuisse de poulet sous cellophane dans un rayon de supermarché' (*EDL*, 99; 98).⁶⁹ If nothing else, what Houellebecq has achieved in his writing is the documentation of a different kind of masculinity, one that is rarely visible within forms of cultural production. As I have suggested elsewhere,⁷⁰ Houellebecq's anti-heroes are almost diametrically opposed to what R. W. Connell has called 'hegemonic masculinity', and which he defines as 'the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy'.⁷¹ Connell recognises that the figure of hegemonic masculinity is an ideal, and in many ways a phantasmatic figure, around which gravitate numerous other variants of masculinity. But he cautions against mistaking these forms of masculinity for 'alternative lifestyles, a matter of consumer choice' and ignoring 'the hard compulsions under which gender configurations are formed, the bitterness as well as the pleasure in gendered experience'.⁷²

If the single people in Houellebecq's world are not the adventurous, outgoing independents depicted in mainstream media, similarly the sex, when it does appear, is often far from satisfying. And, if pornography features prominently in Houellebecq's writing, as has already been established, it is not only in the form of macho sexual fantasies of multiple and energetic conquests. Most often in Houellebecq, as doubtless in real life, pornography features as a rather sad and inadequate replacement

for genuine sexual contact. The pornographic cinema is a common location in Houellebecq's writing, and it appears invariably as a place of desolation populated by 'des retraités et des immigrés' ('pensioners and immigrants' (EDL, 71; 70)).⁷³ In *Les Particules élémentaires*, Bruno begins university in Paris, hoping to start a new life, but soon succumbs to a habitual diet of fast food and porn movies, terrified that he will be recognised upon exiting the cinema. Despite the mainstreaming or 'democratisation' of porno culture over the past few decades, it continues to document a very exclusive world. Bruno reads *Swing* magazine, but:

Il n'envisageait pas réellement de répondre à ces différentes annonces; il ne se sentait pas à la hauteur pour un *gang bang* ou une douche de sperme. Les femmes qui acceptaient de rencontrer des hommes seuls préféraient généralement les blacks, et de toute façon exigeaient des mensurations minimales qu'il était loin d'atteindre. Numéro après numéro, il devait s'y résigner: pour réellement parvenir à s'infiltrer dans le réseau porno, il avait une trop petite queue.⁷⁴ (PE, 101; 118)

In interview, Houellebecq has lamented what he sees as the gradual 'professionalisation' of sex led by the pornography industry. The spectacular nature of porn, he suggests, inspires passivity and encourages viewers to abstain from sexual activity by making them feel inferior.⁷⁵ He cites as evidence the example of a sex club in Cap d'Agde where, once a video screen was installed displaying porn movies, all the customers stopped having sex to watch the screens!⁷⁶ Houellebecq has even disarmingly admitted that, although, as a man of his time, he feels a certain thirst for pornographic images, he does not like this part of himself and would prefer to eliminate it altogether.⁷⁷ When real sex becomes like porn sex, *Les Particules* suggests, it ceases to be pleasurable.⁷⁸ This is Bruno's experience of sex with women in swingers' clubs:

Démesurément élargies par les pénétrations à la chaîne et les doigtés brutaux (souvent pratiqués à plusieurs doigts, voire avec la main entière), leurs chattes étaient à peu près aussi sensibles qu'un bloc de saindoux. Obsédées par le rythme frénétique des actrices du porno industriel, elles branlaient sa bite avec brutalité, comme une tige de chair insensible, avec un ridicule mouvement de piston [...] Il éjaculait vite, et sans réel plaisir.⁷⁹ (PE, 245; 294)

In a world where sexual frustration is the rule, there is always a danger that violence will ensue. In Houellebecq's work, sex – specifically inaccessible or unsatisfactory sex – is never very far from the threat of violence. As he writes in *Les Particules élémentaires*: 'La frustration

sexuelle crée chez l'homme une angoisse qui se manifeste par une crispation violente, localisée au niveau de l'estomac; le sperme semble remonter vers le bas-ventre, lancer des tentacules en direction de la poitrine. L'organe lui-même est douloureux, chaud en permanence, légèrement suintant' (*PE*, 132; 154).⁸⁰ Both Franc Schuerewegen and Sabine van Wesemael have noted the frequency with which the act of ejaculation is associated with vomiting in Houellebecq's work, as though to suggest a morbidity or pathology to sexuality itself.⁸¹ Sexual frustration is by no means the exclusive preserve of men. Poor Brigitte Bardot, irrevocably excluded from erotic experience, can only look on with growing anger:

Elle ne pouvait qu'assister, avec une haine silencieuse, à la libération des autres; voir les garçons se presser, comme des crabes, autour du corps des autres; sentir les relations qui se nouent, les expériences qui se décident, les orgasmes qui se déploient; vivre en tous points une auto-destruction silencieuse auprès du plaisir affiché des autres [...] la jalousie et la frustration fermentèrent lentement, se transformant en une boursofflure de haine paroxystique.⁸² (*EDL*, 91; 90)

At the climax of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, the narrator, driven to distraction by his own frustrations, encourages Tisserand to exact a violent revenge upon the sexually blessed by launching a career as a murderer of young women: 'là tu les posséderas, corps et âme' ('then will you possess them body and soul' (*EDL*, 118; 117)). As they observe a couple of potential victims, the narrator says of Tisserand: 'j'avais l'impression de sentir le sperme pourri qui remontait dans son sexe' ('I had the feeling I could smell the putrid sperm rising in his prick' (*EDL*, 119; 118)). There is just a hint, in passages such as this, that we are being encouraged to look upon the threatened consequences of sexual frustration almost as acts of political violence – an angry exposure of the contradictions of a system that imposes compulsory hedonism but does not promote equality of opportunity in the access to pleasure. As Jean-Claude Guillebaud has argued, there is an offensive hypocrisy to a society that constantly seeks to stimulate sexual desire even as it condemns sex crimes like rape and paedophilia and that moreover *refuses to recognise a connection* between the two phenomena.⁸³

On the other hand, though, is there not something rather juvenile about such violent fantasies? In *Les Particules élémentaires*, Houellebecq (or rather Houellebecq's narrator – we shall see the significance of the distinction below) takes the cruelty of boys around the onset of

puberty as proof that sexuality is a malignant force. ‘Il est difficile d’imaginer plus con, plus agressif, plus insupportable et plus haineux qu’un pré-adolescent [...] le pré-adolescent semble la cristallisation subite, maléfique [...] de ce qu’il y a de pire en l’homme. Comment, dès lors, douter que la sexualité ne soit une force absolument mauvaise?’ (PE, 168; 199).⁸⁴ More precisely, the problem may be that adolescent modes of sexuality have increasingly come to define the norm for the rest of society. As Jean Claude Bologne suggests, with marriage and childbirth taking place later in life, there is a tendency to spread over a much longer period – perhaps a decade and a half – behaviours typical of the relatively short phase of sexual development: a certain sexual urgency, little time for tenderness, a concern above all for seduction as a way of shoring up self-esteem.⁸⁵ Moreover, the ‘problem’ of sexual frustration, as it is set out in Houellebecq’s work, appears in a different light if we approach it from a feminist perspective. For the experience of Houellebecq’s protagonists – that of feeling exclusively valued in terms of their (very limited) sexual appeal and finding themselves effectively excluded from society as a result – is one that has long been familiar to women. Compare, for instance, the indignation of Virginie Despentes: ‘je suis verte de rage qu’en tant que fille qui intéresse peu les hommes, on cherche sans cesse à me faire savoir que je ne devrais même pas être là’.⁸⁶ Despentes has also suggested that had a woman written the equivalent of Houellebecq’s novels a great deal more media attention would have been paid to her appearance, her behaviour and her sexual history.⁸⁷ It may be a relatively new phenomenon – and one specific to the heightened sexual consumerism that currently pertains in the west – for men to feel themselves defined by their sexuality; it is by no means new for women.

The sociologist Catherine Hakim has recently published something like a formalisation of Houellebecq’s theory of sexual differentiation in a book entitled *Honey Money: The Power of Erotic Capital*. Hakim identifies ‘erotic capital’ – ‘a nebulous but crucial combination of beauty, sex appeal, skills of self-presentation and social skills’⁸⁸ – as a ‘fourth asset’ possessed by individuals in addition to the other kinds of capital: economic (wealth), cultural (education, manners, class) and social (networks, ‘who you know’).⁸⁹ Although erotic capital can be accessed to a greater or lesser degree by all individuals, women are historically more used to investing time and money to make it work to their advantage. This is because of what Hakim calls the ‘male sex deficit’: a ‘systematic and apparently universal’ tendency for men to

have a higher sex drive than women, with the result that the majority of heterosexual men 'spend most of their lives being sexually frustrated, to varying degrees'.⁹⁰ Given this structural inequality, Hakim concludes that it is in the interest of women to use their erotic capital in order to achieve their goals in other areas (economic, etc.). Hakim's book represents a call for the importance of erotic capital to be recognised; she argues that it has often been marginalised, precisely because it tends to be concentrated most densely in those individuals who have historically been lacking in the other forms of capital, specifically women and young people.⁹¹

Hakim's theory is, in many ways, very persuasive: most people could readily agree that erotic capital is a reality and that it has demonstrable effects in our societies. Nonetheless, there are a number of unfortunate blind spots in Hakim's presentation. First, she accepts the 'male sex deficit' as an almost universal fact without really historicising or questioning it. Hakim cites a wealth of evidence based on countless sex surveys but does not critically interrogate the categories under discussion. If women are less interested in sex, is this a naturally occurring proclivity or the result of the cultural construction of sex in our societies? What is the role of bravado in men's self-reported sexuality? Women may report less recourse to masturbation, pornography and sexual fantasy than men, but this is to ignore the social meanings of masturbation, the cultural contexts of pornography and the difficulty of defining a sexual fantasy. Secondly, Hakim argues that women should make full use of their erotic capital in order to get what they want, yet gives no recognition to the physical discomfort and emotional pain that countless women endure in the pursuit of this erotic capital, for instance by dieting, by becoming alienated from their own bodies and sexuality in an attempt to dress to please men, or by constantly facing unwanted sexual attention from men. In short, there is a danger that Hakim's promotion of erotic capital simply becomes complicit with our hypersexual culture which has been denounced by many feminists for the highly constricting roles it offers to women.⁹² Thirdly, in addition to assuming that all men are sexually frustrated, Hakim's theory also implies that they are stupid. Even if we accept the reality of the male sex deficit, men are not so gullible as to assume that all flirtatious behaviour on the part of women is going to lead to sex. A man with very limited erotic capital may not be taken in by the flirtatious overtures of a very beautiful woman; on the contrary, he may come to resent them and seek to retaliate in some way. This could ultimately lead to further discrimination and violence against

women of precisely the kind that Hakim decries. One advantage of Houellebecq's analysis over Hakim's is the recognition of this bitterness and resentment stirred up by the market for erotic capital.

Part of the problem, here, is the residual sense of what Carole Pateman has called 'the law of male sex-right', that is the 'demand that women's bodies are sold as commodities in the capitalist market'.⁹³ This notion of men's right to sex depends precisely on the idea of the male sex deficit which, far from being a universal fact, is revealed, upon interrogation, to be profoundly ideological and backed up by a series of dubious assumptions about male sexuality (whether straight or gay). Sheila Jeffreys, citing the work of Gabriel Rotello, summarises these assumptions as follows: from this ideological standpoint, all men would share 'a belief that sex ought to be without consequence and responsibility'; 'a sense of entitlement about sex'; and 'the notion that males [...] are at the mercy of biological forces beyond their control, forces that impel [them] to seek as many partners as possible'.⁹⁴ These assumptions, left over from another era of unquestioned patriarchal rule, are cast into sharp relief in the contemporary sexual arena where men, almost as much as women, are defined and judged by their sexual attractiveness, their sexual prowess and their sexual history. The discrepancy between the two positions, and the subsequent loss of imagined sexual potency and real social authority, is surely responsible, at least in part, for some of the masculine despair expressed in Houellebecq's world.

Whatever the reasons, the men in Houellebecq's novels – and a number of the women too – are thoroughly depressed. The typical response of Houellebecq's protagonists towards the world hovers somewhere between weariness, disappointment and despair. These are, perhaps as much as anything else, books about depression, especially *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. In his first novel, Houellebecq defines the ruling mental state of our times as *bitterness*: 'une immense, une inconcevable amertume' ('an immense and inconceivable bitterness' (*EDL*, 148; 148)). Similarly, the narrator of *Les Particules* states from the very beginning that, in our era, lives are lived out mainly 'dans la solitude et l'amertume' ('in solitude and bitterness' (*PE*, 7; 3, my translation)). Far from being filled with possibilities, 'Une vie peut fort bien être à la fois vide et brève' (*EDL*, 48; 46).⁹⁵ As Annabelle puts it in *Les Particules*, 'jamais je n'aurais imaginé que la vie soit si restreinte, que les possibilités soient si brèves' (*PE*, 275; 329).⁹⁶ Houellebecq's poetry, too, is filled with terribly moving testimonies to the experience of depression. There is a frequent sense of renunciation in these lines, a depressive logic whereby

the whole of life comes to seem futile – ‘La soirée est fichue; peut-être la semaine, peut-être la vie’ (*Po*, 17)⁹⁷ – and nothing will ever change: ‘Et cela recommencera ainsi, tous les jours, jusqu’à la fin du monde’ (*Po*, 18).⁹⁸ Houellebecq’s narrators sometimes designate themselves as being somehow abnormal – ‘tout semblait normal à l’exception de moi’ (*Po*, 67)⁹⁹ – and, as a result, definitively excluded from social life: ‘Je ne suis plus tout à fait là’ (*Po*, 71);¹⁰⁰ ‘Il y a quelque chose de mort au fond de moi’ (*Po*, 147);¹⁰¹ ‘Personne ne me regarde, je suis inexistant’ (*Po*, 165).¹⁰² Fantasies of self-harm and suicide are not far away – both appear in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. Some critics¹⁰³ have argued that Houellebecq’s view of the mediocrity of contemporary civilisation is merely his projection of his own misery on to the rest of the world, which makes his judgement unrepresentative and unfair. But, to attempt a ‘corrective’ reading of Houellebecq, in which his work is seen to be the result of an individual pathology, is surely to miss both the political and the literary force of his writing.

Given the evidence of mental disorder in Houellebecq’s writing, some critics have sought to use psychoanalysis as an explanatory tool in discussing his work. Sabine van Wesemael is not wrong to suggest, in the lineage of Freud, that Houellebecq’s characters fall ill because of their sexuality.¹⁰⁴ However, I would contend that she rather misses the point when she suggests, of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, that the narrator’s libido has failed or that he is afraid of his libido.¹⁰⁵ There is nothing wrong with the narrator’s libido – it is just that no one wants to sleep with him. The psychiatrist in the novel similarly fails to grasp this basic point when she seizes triumphantly upon the fact that the narrator has not had sex in over two years, yet fails to understand the demonstrative evidence of his almost rhetorical question: ‘Est-ce que vous accepteriez de faire l’amour avec moi?’ (*EDL*, 148; 148).¹⁰⁶ Houellebecq’s unreserved demolition job on psychoanalysis in *Extension* – analysis serves only to turn women into ‘d’ignobles pétasses, d’un égocentrisme délirant’ (*EDL*, 103; 102)¹⁰⁷ – should give critics considerable pause before seeking to use it in understanding his work, and to see Houellebecq’s tirade as evidence of some kind of ‘reaction formation’ is too facile a reflex. As Liam McNamara comments, psychoanalysis in this sense is ‘an alibi for a generalized system of sexual inequality’.¹⁰⁸ The narrator of *Extension* is clear about the real cause of most of the disorders in his psychiatric hospital – the answer is not difficult: ‘ils manquaient simplement d’amour. Leurs gestes, leurs attitudes, leurs mimiques trahissaient une soif déchirante

de contacts physiques et de caresses; mais, naturellement, cela n'était pas possible' (EDL, 149; 149).¹⁰⁹ Houellebecq's narrators are nothing if not lucid about their condition. Indeed, the narrator of *Extension* diagnoses himself with an 'excessive' lucidity (EDL, 146; 146). His own actions make little sense to him; instead, he feels himself placed, in relation to them, '*en position d'observateur*' ('*in the position of observer*' (EDL, 153; 151, original italics)). As Martin Robitaille has suggested, this notion of a depressive lucidity goes some way towards explaining the peculiar, distanced perspective from which Houellebecq's novels are narrated.¹¹⁰

Style

The issue of lucidity brings us to the question of Michel Houellebecq's style. No serious consideration of Houellebecq's stance on sexual politics or other matters is possible without some analysis of the way in which his pronouncements are framed, that is to say an interrogation of his written style. Furthermore, as this section will seek to demonstrate, if Houellebecq can be seen to take up a posthumanist position in his accounts of human life and behaviour, this position must be articulated and needs to be understood as a question of style, that is to say as determined by rhetoric, narrative voice and point of view. As we have repeatedly seen in this chapter, the world of Houellebecq is a frustratingly contradictory one. The novels are seemingly full of sex, and yet they are principally concerned with the agonising experience of sexlessness. Houellebecq has been criticised as sexist and offensive towards women, yet some of his arguments rejoin in surprising ways key tenets of feminism. The writing is often crude and objectionable, yet it manages to paint sensitive and moving portraits of loneliness and depression. If Houellebecq is able to be all these things at once, and yet still present a coherent œuvre, it is surely because his work is held together by its style. Dominique Noguez was the first critic to engage seriously with the question of Houellebecq's style. As he pointed out, the author was often accused of having no style,¹¹¹ and yet many of the passages that made Houellebecq so controversial were striking precisely because of the way they were formulated.¹¹² As Best and Crowley have written, 'his texts scandalise, but, scandalously, do so evasively, moving the goalposts'.¹¹³ If it is difficult to pin Houellebecq down to a particular position, it is partly because his style is so restless. As he himself advised

in his ‘method’, *Rester vivant* (1991): ‘Au sujet de la forme, n’hésitez jamais à vous contredire. Bifurquez, changez de direction autant de fois que nécessaire’ (RV, 16).¹¹⁴ Christian Monnin has remarked that it is often difficult to know whether to take Houellebecq’s novels seriously or to treat them as a monumental joke. The solution, he suggests, is to read them at two different levels, *both* as an indication of one individual’s prejudices and hang-ups *and* as a revelation of the unspoken truths and structural blockages that organise our society and our era.¹¹⁵ Or, as Best and Crowley put it, ‘His work is, unavoidably, *both* the ultimate symptom *and* the critical diagnosis of the mediated, self-conscious, lost world it describes’.¹¹⁶ As such, Houellebecq’s style is deceptively simple, and nowhere is this clearer, suggests Marc Weitzmann, than in the writing of those who have sought to imitate him and succeeded only in producing clichés and banality.¹¹⁷ Our own analysis of Houellebecq’s style will focus on two points that appear crucial to the elusive nature of his writing: his unstable register and his shifting focalisation.

Houellebecq’s writing switches frequently and disconcertingly between registers just as his novels move in and out of different genres. In a valuable article, Robert Dion and Élisabeth Haghebaert have discussed the variety of genres marshalled in Houellebecq’s novels, *Les Particules élémentaires* in particular: from family saga to *Bildungsroman*, romance to science fiction, poetry to essay. This also includes some of the most unfashionable or unacceptable of genres – pornography, *roman à thèse*, the experimental novel *à la Zola*, the one (e.g., porn) serving to make the other (e.g., *roman à thèse*) more palatable. At the same time, the inclusion of sociological, historical and scientific analyses – *Les Particules* frequently includes physiological or zoological descriptions, often employing scientific or Latin terms for particular organs and organisms – gives the novel a totalising ambition that it shares with German romanticism. As Dion and Haghebaert suggest, the novel partakes of ‘une logique de l’hypermarché où les formes sont à portée de main et constituent autant de produits de consommation disponibles pour un plaisir immédiat’.¹¹⁸ Thus, Houellebecq can move from the appearance of ostrich steaks in *Monoprix* to the replication of DNA from one paragraph to the next (*PE*, 162–3; 194) or interpret a cartoon character as a Kantian ideal (*PE*, 35; 37–8). More charitably, Houellebecq can be seen to be underlining the necessary coexistence of different interpretational models in an uncertain, quantic world, ‘puisque la “réalité” telle que l’envisagent les disciplines scientifiques se révèle au total aussi parcellaire, contradictoire

et sujette à caution que la représentation littéraire qu'on peut en donner'.¹¹⁹ Dion and Haghebaert conclude that although Houellebecq's individual generic exercises may be flawed their combination produces a whole of a new and strange complexity, and helps to generate 'une ambivalence qui n'est ni bien-pensante, ni gratuitement provocatrice'.¹²⁰ As Dominique Noguez showed, Houellebecq moves confidently between literary and colloquial registers.¹²¹ He can move suddenly from the slangy to the sublime. Thus, at the beginning of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, when describing the 'deux boudins du service', the narrator remarks, incongruously: 'Leurs voix me paraissaient venir de très haut, un peu comme le Saint-Esprit' (*EDL*, 6; 4).¹²² Both *Extension* and *Les Particules*, despite all the grubby material they contain, achieve something like an elevation to the sublime at their respective ends. At the end of *Extension*, the narrator cycles out into the hills of the Ardèche, exclaiming to himself, 'Combien je me sens capable, jusqu'au bout, d'imposantes représentations mentales! Comme elle est nette, encore, l'image que je me fais du monde!' (*EDL*, 155; 154).¹²³ Meanwhile, *Les Particules* closes with evocations of the poetic luminosity of the Irish landscape into which Michel disappeared: 'Ce pays a quelque chose de très particulier. Tout vibre constamment, l'herbe des prairies comme la surface des eaux, tout semble indiquer une présence' (*PE*, 292; 350).¹²⁴ (The ambivalent role of the sublime in Houellebecq's writing will be discussed further in Chapter 3.) As for the poetry, Marc Weitzmann has commented upon the unusual combination of a very classical form with the mundane modern subject matter of supermarkets, motorways and unemployment benefits.¹²⁵ However, as David Evans has persuasively demonstrated, the rigorous form of this poetry tends to break down at precisely those points of greatest mental and emotional distress: 'C'est un drame qui se joue en microcosme entre une structure métrique absolue et des éléments textuels qui sont, comme le poète, "difficiles à situer"'.¹²⁶

This mixture of styles and registers has been observed to have a kind of levelling effect on Houellebecq's writing, flattening out his prose. Whether describing the monotonies of daily life and depression, the heights of romantic love or graphically horrific episodes of violence, everything seems to be narrated in the same dispassionate, unflinching tone. More than one critic has suggested that in the title *Plateforme* we should read *plate forme* or *forme plate*: flat style.¹²⁷ Others have described the apparently unwavering 'placidity' of Houellebecq's tone.¹²⁸ As we saw, Robitaille sees this as a kind of extension of the protagonists'

depressive lucidity.¹²⁹ Houellebecq himself, following the work of Jean Cohen, has suggested that this kind of flattening could be regarded as a poetic mode of perception in the same way that certain atmospheric conditions such as fog or crepuscular light incline towards the poetic: ‘Tout ce qui contribue à dissoudre les limites, à faire du monde un tout homogène et mal différencié sera empreint de puissance poétique’ (*I*, 33/*I2*, 77).¹³⁰ In *Rester vivant*, Houellebecq notes the similarity between the depressive and the poetic modes: ‘L’expérience poétique et l’expérience névrotique sont deux chemins qui se croisent, s’entrecroisent, et finissent le plus souvent par se confondre’ (*RV*, 25).¹³¹ Practically, Houellebecq’s flat style is achieved, as Noguez has shown, through an abundance of litotes, expressions such as ‘pas mal’, the adverbial use of ‘assez’ and ‘un peu’; the expressionless narration of horrific incidents, or focus on mundane, irrelevant points of detail; the closure of paragraphs on short, neutral, resigned sentences such as ‘C’était bien’, ‘C’est très déplaisant’, etc.¹³² The overall effect is of a kind of blankness to the writing. As Noguez puts it, ‘C’est comme si, sur les sujets les plus noirs, la très particulière qualité de cet humour gris était obtenue par une écriture blanche’.¹³³

This blankness of tone has given rise to one of the most frequently cited intertexts in discussions of Houellebecq: Albert Camus’s *L’Étranger* (1942). The back-cover blurb (attributed to Tibor Fischer) on the English translation of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* proclaims the novel as ‘*L’Étranger* for the info generation’. In places, Houellebecq does seem to be making deliberate reference to Camus, as in the opening line of *Plateforme* – ‘Mon père est mort il y a un an’ (‘Father died last year’ (*P*, 9; 3)) – which echoes the famous beginning of *L’Étranger*, ‘Aujourd’hui, maman est morte’ (‘Mother died today’). Similarly the murder to which *Extension*’s narrator tries to incite Tisserand – ‘fais-toi donc la main sur un jeune nègre!’,¹³⁴ he encourages (*EDL*, 118; 117) – recalls the killing of an Arab in Camus’s novel. It is true, too, that there is sometimes an ‘existentialist’ tone to Houellebecq’s writing, as in these lines from *Le Sens du combat*: ‘Les objets sont bien là, mais sa raison s’absente/ Il traverse la nuit à la recherche d’un sens’ (*Po*, 14).¹³⁵ But, arguably, the comparison of Houellebecq’s ‘blank’ style with that of Camus does not hold up. As Noguez remarks, the ‘blank’ epithet has been so widely applied, to everyone from Stendhal to Jean-Philippe Toussaint, that it is ultimately fairly meaningless.¹³⁶ Especially as Houellebecq’s style also contains sudden exclamations, dark ironies, hyperbole and hysterical outbursts. It is, finally, according to Roger Célestin, precisely

the self-consciousness with which Houellebecq's narrators mix their registers that distances them from *L'Étranger's* Meursault.¹³⁷

It is this mixture of registers that gives Houellebecq's writing its troubling, unstable tone. Consider, for instance, this passage from near the beginning of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*:

Mon propos n'est pas de vous enchanter par de subtiles notations psychologiques. Je n'ambitionne pas de vous arracher des applaudissements par ma finesse et mon humour [...] Toute cette accumulation de détails réalistes, censés camper des personnages nettement différenciés, m'est toujours apparue, je m'excuse de le dire, comme pure foutaise [...] Autant observer les homards qui se marchent dessus dans un bocal [...] Du reste, je fréquente peu les êtres humains.¹³⁸ (EDL, 16; 13–14)

The passage moves from sophisticated authorial comment, through outright insult to Houellebecq's literary peers ('*foutaise*'), to the disorientating comparison to lobsters, and finally back to the narrator's social isolation. The tone of the passage is difficult to pin down, somewhere between false modesty, unabashed arrogance, veiled aggression and disarming self-deprecation. Houellebecq frequently achieves these sudden changes of gear through bathos, as in another example from *Extension*:

Bien entendu l'expérience m'a rapidement appris que je ne suis appelé qu'à rencontrer des gens sinon exactement identiques, du moins tout à fait similaires dans leurs coutumes, leurs opinions, leurs goûts, leur manière générale d'aborder la vie [...] Il n'empêche, j'ai également eu l'occasion de me rendre compte que les êtres humains ont souvent à cœur de se singulariser par de subtiles et déplaisantes variations, défauts, traits de caractère et ainsi de suite – sans doute dans le but d'obliger leurs interlocuteurs à les traiter comme des individus à part entière [...] Certains cadres supérieurs raffolent des filets de hareng; d'autres les détestent.¹³⁹ (EDL, 21; 19)

Here, the seriousness of the sociological demonstration is undercut by the absurd anticlimax of the filleted herrings example. The use of food to provide this effect is common in Houellebecq, so much so that it becomes something of an easy riff found throughout his work. The narrator of *Extension* imagines the night on which he was conceived by his parents, concluding: 'Peu après, ils avaient mangé du poulet froid' ('They'd eaten cold chicken afterwards' (EDL, 151; 150)). Commenting on the existential anguish of individuated consciousness in *Les Particules élémentaires*: 'Malgré le retour alternatif des nuits, une conscience indivi-

duelle persisterait jusqu'à la fin dans leurs chairs séparées. Les rollmops ne pouvaient en aucun cas constituer une solution' (PE, 201; 241).¹⁴⁰ All of this culminates in the *La Possibilité d'une île*'s notorious sentence: 'Le jour du suicide de mon fils, je me suis fait des œufs à la tomate' ('On the day of my son's suicide, I made a tomato omelette' (PI, 28; 19)).

More generally, though, Houellebecq's writing is littered with *non sequiturs* – alien, inappropriate remarks that seem to come out of nowhere.¹⁴¹ During a meeting at the Ministry of Agriculture, the narrator of *Extension* says of Catherine Lechardoy: 'je l'imagine très bien éclatant en sanglots, le matin au moment de s'habiller, seule' (EDL, 35; 33)¹⁴² and, of an older colleague, 'je n'aimerais pas être son fils' ('I wouldn't like to be his son' (EDL, 35; 33)). Michel in *Les Particules*, throwing the body of a dead canary down a rubbish chute, imagines it ending up in vast waste bins 'remplies de filtres à café, de raviolis en sauce et d'organes sexuels tranchés' (PE, 16; 14).¹⁴³ As Martin Robitaille has commented, the levelling gaze of Houellebecq's depressive lucidity lends such images 'un surcroît d'étrangeté'.¹⁴⁴ Often such *non sequiturs* are deployed to generate humour – 'David [di Meola] se mit au jogging et commença à fréquenter des cercles satanistes' (PE, 208; 249)¹⁴⁵ – but, as Christian Monnin has observed, the humour often emerges at the most serious or emotional moments of the novels.¹⁴⁶ Houellebecq himself has suggested that in a culture in which conversation is ruled by a generalised tone of *derision*, with the expression of genuine feelings or ideas considered somehow 'vulgar', the omnipresent filter of humour threatens to break down and collapse into the tragic: 'le tragique intervient exactement à ce moment où le dérisoire ne parvient plus à être perçu comme *fun*' (I, 73/ I2, 38/RV, 50).¹⁴⁷ But these shifts in tone can also be dependent upon the precarious coexistence of genres. Thus, Best and Crowley have shown how Houellebecq's pornographic episodes are often interrupted by the appearance of real emotion, precisely that which is usually absent from pornography;¹⁴⁸ while Liesbeth Korthals Altes notes how emotional material is frequently cut short by the introduction of cold, scientific descriptions, as in the evocation of the parasites that feed upon the corpse of Bruno's grandfather.¹⁴⁹

As all of the above examples have shown, it is often difficult for the reader of Michel Houellebecq to know how to situate him or herself in relation to the text and the ideas expressed therein. In short, it is hard to know what, and indeed whom, to believe. This is doubtless responsible for much of the controversy surrounding Houellebecq and for some of the critical unease over many of his pronouncements. To

quote just one example: ‘on ne sait jamais s’il est dans la dérision ou s’il endosse les propos de ses personnages’.¹⁵⁰ As Best and Crowley put it, ‘His texts intermittently juxtapose irony and sincerity in a manner which makes it impossible to know which tone we should be taking seriously, if any’.¹⁵¹ *Extension du domaine de la lutte* may be, in a sense, a *roman à thèse*, at least in so far as it seeks to involve the reader in the demonstration of its thesis; yet the black humour and parodic tone undermine the establishment of a doctrine. If these techniques invite a kind of complicity with the author – or at least the narrator – it remains impossible to determine the ideological or affective position of that author.¹⁵² Dominique Noguez has gone as far as to see in Houellebecq’s distanced, ironic focalisation ‘l’arrière-petit-fils le plus doué du Flaubert de *Bouvard et Pécuchet*’.¹⁵³

The uncertainty with which we are to treat Houellebecq’s literary statements is further complicated by the complexity of the narrative voice in his novels. The use of the first person can lead to a lazy critical assumption that the narrator can be unproblematically mapped on to the author – all the more so in *Plateforme* where Houellebecq mischievously named his first-person narrator Michel. But, as he has remarked, ‘Le “je” est vraiment flexible, on peut avec lui exprimer aussi, au mieux, ce qu’on voudrait ne pas être’.¹⁵⁴ Best and Crowley suggest that given what we learn of the narrator in *Extension* – the bitterness over his failed relationship with Véronique and his increasingly serious mental illness – his misogynistic rants are ‘implicitly disowned, displaced by [their] articulation through this desperate frame’.¹⁵⁵ But, in any case, the narrator himself is not spared the force of his own critical, self-deprecatory remarks, nor the sense of strangeness with which the novel becomes coloured (‘il y a déjà longtemps que le sens de mes actes a cessé de m’apparaître clairement’ (*EDL*, 152–3; 151)¹⁵⁶). Elsewhere in *Extension*, Houellebecq seems momentarily to favour a second-person narration (a form he occasionally employs in his poetry).¹⁵⁷ The passage begins as a kind of generalised second person, or perhaps just another way for the narrator to address himself: ‘Vous avez eu une vie [...] L’existence vous apparaissait riche de possibilités inédites [...] Vous aussi, vous vous êtes intéressé au monde’ (*EDL*, 13; 11).¹⁵⁸ But subsequently this passage turns into a very direct address to the reader:

Maintenant, vous êtes loin du bord: oh oui! comme vous êtes loin du bord! Vous avez longtemps cru à l’existence d’une autre rive; tel n’est plus le cas [...] L’eau paraît de plus en plus froide, et surtout de plus en plus amère. Vous n’êtes plus tout jeune. Vous allez mourir, maintenant.

Ce n'est rien. Je suis là. Je ne vous laisserai pas tomber. Continuez votre lecture.¹⁵⁹ (EDL, 14; 12)

The play of pronouns, and the shift of persona and responsibility here are unexpected and puzzling.¹⁶⁰ In Houellebecq's third-person narration, too, the authority of each voice is open to question. For instance, Korthals Altes points out the way in which Bruno's report on the Cap d'Agde resort in *Les Particules*, which he presents as a sort of Utopia of social-democratic sexuality, is subtly undermined by incongruous comparisons to both Enid Blyton's Famous Five and to Nazi Germany!¹⁶¹ Liam McNamara has further pointed out the hypocrisy of Bruno who repeatedly laments a cruel system of sexual inequality and aggressive erotic interpellation, yet, when he gains access to more liberal sexual practices through his relationship with Christiane, 'he leaps in with gusto; all moral and ethical judgement is suspended'.¹⁶² In short, all of Houellebecq's characters and narrators seem to be subject to a constant process of ironising, sometimes through such classical, almost Flaubertian techniques as free indirect speech ('Oui, c'est du travail, mais le travail ne lui fait pas peur, à elle' (EDL, 27; 25)¹⁶³) or the italicisation of received ideas: 'Peut-être, me dis-je, ce déplacement en province va-t-il me *changer les idées*' (EDL, 49; 47);¹⁶⁴ 'ma société a développé une authentique *culture d'entreprise*' (EDL, 17; 15).¹⁶⁵

Above all, the narration of Houellebecq's novels is characterised by a seemingly unbridgeable *distance*. It is in this sense that Houellebecq's fiction can most clearly be seen to adopt a posthumanist perspective in that the narrative voice frequently refuses to identify with the human. Houellebecq's gaze is clinical: in *Renaissance* (1999) he talks of 'Découvrant l'existence humaine / Comme on soulève un pansement' (Po, 290).¹⁶⁶ The point of view appears, on numerous occasions, almost anthropological, or ethnological – our society is observed *as though from the outside* precisely because Houellebecq's narrators do not feel themselves to be fully a part of it. Thus, a disco at the Lieu du Changement 'confirmait à l'évidence le caractère indépasseable de la soirée dansante comme mode de rencontre sexuelle en société non communiste. Les sociétés primitives [...] axaient elles aussi leurs fêtes sur la danse, voire la transe' (PE, 116; 136).¹⁶⁷ This millennial perspective allows for thoroughly dispassionate judgements such as, of Michel and Annabelle: 'Sur le plan des intérêts de l'espèce ils étaient deux individus vieillissants, de valeur génétique médiocre' (PE, 237; 282).¹⁶⁸ The point of view of Houellebecq's narration is similar to that of Marc Djerzinski, Michel's father, himself an ethnographic filmmaker: 'Il promenait sur les célébrités

qu'il côtoyait un regard indifférent, et filmait Bardot ou Sagan avec autant de considération que s'il s'était agi de calmars ou d'écrevisses' (*PE*, 29; 29–30).¹⁶⁹

Comparisons of people to animals in Houellebecq's writing are ubiquitous (indeed, we have already seen several in passing in this chapter). So much so that, rather than an easy fallback, they represent a veritable world view for the author.¹⁷⁰ Tisserand's black and gold tracksuit 'lui donne un peu l'allure d'un scarabée' (*EDL*, 62; 61).¹⁷¹ A young black man on a train is described as 'Un animal, probablement dangereux' ('An animal, probably dangerous' (*EDL*, 82; 81)); compare the black high-school student in *Les Particules*, a 'big baboon' (*PE*, 192; 230). Racial and national stereotypes are certainly not spared in such comparisons: 'À la table à côté une demi-douzaine de touristes italiennes babillaient avec vivacité, tels d'innocents volatiles' (*PE*, 269; 321).¹⁷² Elsewhere, however, animal imagery is more extensive, as in the description of a school dormitory:

Les sociétés animales fonctionnent pratiquement toutes sur un système de dominance lié à la force relative de leurs membres. Ce système se caractérise par une hiérarchie stricte [...] Les positions hiérarchiques sont généralement déterminées par des rituels de combat [...] La brutalité et la domination, générales dans les sociétés animales, s'accompagnent déjà chez le chimpanzé (*Pan troglodytes*) d'actes de cruauté gratuite accomplis à l'encontre de l'animal le plus faible. Cette tendance atteint son comble chez les sociétés humaines primitives, et dans les sociétés développées chez l'enfant et l'adolescent jeune.¹⁷³ (*PE*, 45–6; 51)

As Robert Dion remarks, the persistence of animal metaphors in Houellebecq serves repeatedly to remind the reader of humanity's place in nature, a nature which is portrayed as cruel and dangerous, characterised by behavioural determinism and the survival of the fittest.¹⁷⁴ Not only does Houellebecq's perspective reject the idea of a human 'exception', it also challenges the spurious notion that humans are 'more evolved' than other animals.¹⁷⁵ As Dominique Noguez points out, this results in some difficult ontological questions for readers: 'quelles raisons sérieuses avons-nous de considérer qu'une vie consciente vaut mieux que l'existence léthargique des moules ou des têtards? [...] quelles raisons sérieuses avons-nous de tenir le fait d'exister comme préférable à son contraire?'.¹⁷⁶

It is not simply the case that the overall narration of Houellebecq's novels – be it first-person or third-person – is characterised by a distanced perspective; often the author seeks to add a further layer of

distance between himself, or between his narrators, and the sentiments expressed in his writing. The deliberate distancing device of placing controversial ideas in the mouth of secondary characters is one that recurs frequently throughout Houellebecq's work. Thus, the hysterical tirade against feminists quoted above is itself delivered by a woman, Christiane, as though to pre-empt the criticism that these are merely the bitter, misogynistic comments of a male. This device achieves its most notorious exploitation in *Plateforme* where Houellebecq repeatedly invents Arab characters to voice anti-Islamic sentiments. As Dion and Haghebaert have suggested, in such passages Houellebecq could be accused of reviving the worst qualities of the *roman à thèse*, since his characters here become mere ciphers to demonstrate his overarching thesis, frequently disappearing from the narrative or being killed off once their job is done.¹⁷⁷ Sometimes, however, the purpose of such characters is more complicated. In *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, the notion that people are less interested in sex than the media would have us believe is expressed by a priest friend of the narrator. Now, one might think it unremarkable that a priest should feel some distaste for, and resistance to, the sexual clamour of the media. But, in any case, the narrative proves him wrong, since the priest ends up experiencing a crisis of faith after developing an erotic obsession for a twenty-year-old nurse, herself never seriously interested in him: 'c'était surtout l'idée de coucher avec un curé qui l'excitait, qu'elle trouvait marrante' (*EDL*, 140; 140).¹⁷⁸ The character's trajectory thus illustrates much of the ambivalence around sex to be found in Houellebecq: at once a sense of weariness or disgust at the constant pressure of sexual one-upmanship and, at the same time, a deeply ingrained incapacity to resist sexual allure when it presents itself and a tendency to allow sexuality to play a defining role in our sense of self.

Part of the reason for the distanced perspective of *Les Particules élémentaires*, of course, is that it is supposed to be recounted from a point far in the future. It is revealed at the end of the novel that the omniscient narrator is in fact a representative of the cloned posthuman race that came to replace humanity largely thanks to the scientific advances begun by Michel. This helps to explain the lengthy passages of historical synthesis in the novel which appear, as Monnin suggests, as the voice of *science*.¹⁷⁹ Certainly such episodes are concerned with the dispassionate establishment of a historical causality, as in the identification of the year 1974 as a turning point for the liberalisation of morals and the installation of a leisure society in France, or the neutral tone of sentences

such as: 'L'extension progressive du marché de la séduction, l'éclatement concomitant du couple traditionnel, le probable décollage économique de l'Europe occidentale: tout concordait en effet pour promettre au secteur [de la chirurgie esthétique] d'excellentes possibilités d'expansion' (*PE*, 27; 28).¹⁸⁰ Elsewhere, however, the scientific objectivity wavers and description takes on a derisory tone that belongs firmly to the present, as in this evocation of rural life in the generation of Michel's grandparents:

on a la nature et le bon air, on cultive quelques parcelles (dont le nombre est précisément fixé par un système d'héritage strict), de temps en temps on tire un sanglier; on baise à droite à gauche, en particulier sa femme, qui donne naissance à des *enfants*; on élève les dits enfants pour qu'ils prennent leur place dans le même écosystème, on attrape une maladie, et c'est marre.¹⁸¹ (*PE*, 24; 24)

The tone of the paragraph implies that this way of life is dated, vanished and a little absurd, and, while this may be true from the point of view of a rich western nation at the end of the twentieth century, it is difficult to see why it would be any *more* dated and absurd for a historian centuries in the future than would the lifestyles of Michel and Bruno themselves. Speaking of whom, the character of Bruno is highly problematic from the point of view of this future narration. More than half of the novel is told from Bruno's perspective, but on reflection it is not clear why this should be so, since the book is ostensibly about Michel and his invention of the conditions of possibility for the new race. As such, as Jack Abecassis has noted, it is 'structured as a hagiography (the birth, struggle, temptation and finally conversion of a Savior)'.¹⁸² As various commentators have pointed out, Bruno effectively serves to demonstrate the sexual misery that Michel's science enables the human race to transcend. However, that does not explain how the future narrator should come to know the intimate details of Bruno's life, nor why they should be told from his point of view. To cite just the first example among many, Bruno's first memory is related as his humiliation, aged 4, at being unable to make a leaf necklace at school. But the detail of the memory could not realistically be available to the narrator, nor even to Michel, unaware of Bruno's existence at the time; while the identification of the schoolgirls as displaying 'déjà les signes d'une stupide résignation femelle' (*PE*, 38; 41)¹⁸³ clearly belongs to the voice of the adult Bruno.

The existence of the future narrator goes some way towards explaining a stance that has been much criticised in Houellebecq. Not only does Houellebecq present human life as an arena characterised by much

suffering and disappointment, the novels tend ultimately to imply that this suffering is inevitable. This is a largely deterministic, not to say fatalistic view of life with apparently little room for meaningful social change. This attitude needs to be understood as the point of view of humanity's successor, relating the teleological narrative of the advent of its own race: the sexual stalemant of millennial man appears therefore as the ineluctable outcome of a series of incremental steps up the social and economic ladder of capitalism, with the only solution proving to be the radical one of *species change*. Thus the narrator of *Les Particules* may be sympathetic towards the plight of humanity, but the question of action to change that plight is entirely moot since history has already shown that the solution to the problem was a collective decision by the species to organise its own overcoming. However, this narratorial point of view – which we might characterise as a kind of impotent compassion – already describes the attitude of the narrator in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. He too feels sorry for many of his fellow humans, *but there is nothing he can do*. We have already seen the narrator's perception of Catherine Lechardoy's secret suffering, but he makes no move to reach out to her emotionally. When his priest friend confesses his personal crisis, the narrator remarks: 'À l'évidence, je ne pouvais rien pour lui' (*EDL*, 140; 140).¹⁸⁴ Compare this passing remark about a policeman to whom the narrator reports a stolen car: 'je ne pouvais rien faire pour alléger son fardeau' (*EDL*, 22; 20).¹⁸⁵ The consequence of Houellebecq's (narrators') depressive lucidity, in other words, is a chronic inability to *act*. The poetry refers to 'L'impossibilité permanente de l'action' (*Po*, 13).¹⁸⁶ And the political consequences of Houellebecq's writing must therefore stem from this 'exhausted, depressing premise that there is in fact no alternative'.¹⁸⁷ In other words, it is as though the *posthuman* perspective of *Les Particules*'s future narrator – for whom any question of action to change the living conditions of humanity has ceased to be relevant – is in a sense anticipated by the arguably already *posthumanist* perspective of *Extension*'s narrator who no longer believes in the humanist promises of self-improvement and social progress.

Politics

In this context of apparent surrender, to what extent can we continue to see a political significance in Houellebecq's work? To what extent, in fact – let us go further – is Michel Houellebecq a political writer?

First of all, it is worth remembering that Houellebecq's descriptions of sexuality, whether sexual ease or sexual hardship, unfailingly take place within the carefully developed context of a socio-economic reality. The opening chapters of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, for instance, describe the difficulties of what Houellebecq calls 'living according to the rules' ('vivre selon la règle' (*EDL*, 12; 10)), a process which proves to be 'complex, multiform' ('complexe, multiforme' (*EDL*, 12; 10)), since it involves not only paying bills on time, but also a certain amount of compulsory consumption, plus the effective occupying of a small margin of free time and, through all of the above, the maintenance of a sense of respectability and self-worth. For instance, when the narrator forgets where he has parked his car, he is torn between the obligation to report it missing, the realisation that the vehicle 'ne [lui] avait causé que des tracas' (*EDL*, 8; 6)¹⁸⁸ and the recognition that 'Avouer qu'on a perdu sa voiture, c'est pratiquement se rayer du corps social' (*EDL*, 9; 7).¹⁸⁹ Similarly complicated is the experience of buying a bed, which offers perhaps one of the neatest demonstrations of the way in which the economic and the sexual are interwoven in Houellebecq's world: 'l'achat d'un lit, de nos jours, présente effectivement des difficultés considérables, et il y a bien de quoi vous mener au suicide' (*EDL*, 101; 100).¹⁹⁰ Quite apart from the cost and the necessity to take time off work for delivery, the purchase of a bed involves a public statement of one's sex life: 'Acheter un lit à une place c'est avouer publiquement qu'on n'a pas de vie sexuelle, et qu'on n'envisage pas d'en avoir dans un avenir rapproché, ni même lointain' (*EDL*, 102; 101).¹⁹¹ The pleasures and terrors of consuming 'according to the rules' are further evoked in Houellebecq's frequent reference to supermarkets, a topos that has become so thoroughly associated with him that images of carrier bags and shopping trolleys adorn the covers of his books. A stanza from the poem 'Hypermarché – Novembre' perhaps best captures the ambiguous nature of the supermarket, at once a place of delirious possibility – 'l'authentique paradis moderne',¹⁹² as Houellebecq has called it elsewhere (*I*, 42/*I2*, 58) – and of frighteningly brutal compulsion, a balance which is precariously maintained by a series of unspoken rules of behaviour:

D'abord j'ai trébuché dans un congélateur.
 Je me suis mis à pleurer et j'avais un peu peur.
 Quelqu'un a grommelé que je cassais l'ambiance;
 Pour avoir l'air normal j'ai repris mon avance.¹⁹³ (*Po*, 113)

The fact that the narrator in *Extension* witnesses a man's death in a

supermarket implies that this has now become the locus for the rites of passage of human existence. Meanwhile, in *Les Particules élémentaires*, supermarkets appear to play a much more significant role than governments in shaping the meaning of citizenship: ‘Dans leur dernière livraison, les *Dernières Nouvelles de Monoprix* mettaient plus que jamais l’accent sur la notion d’entreprise citoyenne. Une fois de plus, l’éditorialiste croisait le fer avec cette idée reçue qui voulait que la gastronomie soit incompatible avec la forme’ (PE, 228; 272).¹⁹⁴

In particular, Houellebecq’s writing, and especially *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, provides a detailed portrait of the world of middle-class, white-collar work in France around the turn of the millennium. Marc Weitzmann has called the novel an ‘autopsy’ of company life.¹⁹⁵ Houellebecq employs the language of business in *Extension*, but does so from the perspective of ironic distance that characterises all of his narration, thereby lining this discourse with a layer of deadpan sarcasm:

Bien avant que le mot ne soit à la mode, ma société a développé une authentique *culture d’entreprise* (création d’un logo, distribution de sweat-shirts aux salariés, séminaires de motivation en Turquie). C’est une entreprise performante, jouissant d’une réputation enviée dans sa partie; à tous points de vue, une *bonne boîte*.¹⁹⁶ (EDL, 17; 15–16)

Houellebecq’s work is perhaps at its most profoundly *French* in the contempt it displays for the rigid hierarchy of formations and titles in the social life of the country. Thus, on his IT demonstration tour in Rouen, the narrator meets the local manager Schnäbele who proudly declares himself to be an IGREF: ‘je ne sais pas ce que c’est, mais j’apprendrai par la suite que les IGREF sont une variété particulière de hauts fonctionnaires, qu’on ne rencontre que dans les organismes dépendant du ministère de l’Agriculture – un peu comme les énarques, mais moins bien tout de même’ (EDL, 58; 58).¹⁹⁷ Schnäbele’s triumph is complete when he learns that Tisserand studied at ‘l’École Supérieure de Commerce de Bastia, ou quelque chose du même genre, à la limite de la crédibilité’ (EDL, 58; 58).¹⁹⁸

Working life, as portrayed by Houellebecq, is almost entirely thankless. He remarks, in *Les Particules élémentaires*, on the impossibility of establishing meaningful human relationships among colleagues in a culture where ‘authentic’ interaction is indefinitely deferred (PE, 268; 320–1). This is especially so in a business environment where individuals are called upon to be, as Houellebecq puts it in ‘Approches du désarroi’, ‘indéfiniment mutables’ (‘infinitely mutable’ (I, 65/I2, 29; RV,

45)). Nonetheless, working life remains largely monotonous – ‘Une fois qu’on est entré dans le monde du travail toutes les années se ressemblent’ (*PE*, 185; 222)¹⁹⁹ – and is unlikely to end well. *Extension* relates the sad spectacle of a farewell drink for a retiring colleague: after thirty years of loyal service, plus a couple where he became sidelined after failing to keep up with the latest technical innovations, the man is presented with a fishing rod. The narrator’s own departure from the firm, following a nervous breakdown, is described as ‘the death of a professional’ (‘Mort d’un cadre’, (*EDL*, 134; 134)). However gloomy this portrait may appear, though, Houellebecq is also disarmingly honest about the ways in which workers can be taken in by colleagues who play their management role to perfection. The narrator of *Extension* describes his dynamic young boss: ‘il ne marche pas dans les couloirs, il glisse. S’il pouvait voler il le ferait’ (*EDL*, 36; 34).²⁰⁰ When the boss meets with him, ‘C’est un moment très tendre; il est penché vers moi et vers moi seul; on pourrait croire que nous sommes deux amants que la vie vient de réunir après une longue absence’ (*EDL*, 37; 35).²⁰¹ A little later: ‘Je discerne en lui un grand professionnel de la gestion des ressources humaines; intérieurement, j’en roucoule. Il me paraît de plus en plus beau’ (*EDL*, 39; 37).²⁰²

The world of work that is described and satirised by Houellebecq is, to a large extent, the same world that has been analysed and criticised by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello in their monumental work *Le Nouvel Esprit du capitalisme*.²⁰³ Boltanski and Chiapello describe a transition to a post-Fordist, post-Taylorist organisation of work where large bureaucratic companies are no longer considered to be profitable entities. The new organisation of labour, by abolishing traditional hierarchies, tends to give more autonomy to the worker, but increases job insecurity by eliminating the very conditions of possibility of the ‘job for life’. Thus, large companies are replaced by *networks* of smaller enterprises while careers themselves are replaced by *projects*. Success in one project will provide opportunities for valuable networking and it is hoped will lead to the next project by effectively demonstrating an individual’s *employability*. But such projects require constant renewal precisely because each one is recognised as having a limited lifespan. The failure to renew one’s projects and to extend one’s networks implies, in the long term, one’s effective exclusion from the world of (white-collar) work. Alain Ehrenberg, who has noted the way in which the rise in clinical cases of depression has accompanied this transition in business culture, suggests that the new demands placed on individual initiative are taking their toll in terms of the strain placed on people’s mental health. Depression

appears as the pathological mirror image of precisely the kind of mental attitude that is demanded of today's workers: 'Défaut de projet, défaut de motivation, défaut de communication, le déprimé est l'envers exact de nos normes de socialisation'.²⁰⁴ As Boltanski and Chiapello stress, the reason the demands of this new culture place such a heavy emotional burden on workers is because they tend to cause a confusion between the boundaries of professional and personal life. The launching of a new project requires a demonstration of *enthusiasm* and an investment of *trust* in colleagues from other networks, both qualities more usually associated with personal relationships. Increasingly, the world of work necessitates the deployment of certain personal qualities, what Arlie Russell Hochschild some twenty-five years ago referred to as 'emotional labour' – the situation in which 'Seeming to "love the job" becomes part of the job'.²⁰⁵ Thus it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between work and leisure time, or between professional networking and genuine human sympathy (as in the narrator's experience with his boss, cited above). Or, as Hochschild puts it, it becomes harder to answer the question 'is this me or the company talking?'²⁰⁶ In this context, each individual *produces himself*. If one's personality has an exchange value in the world of work, then that personality comes to be seen not only as a tool of work, but as the *product of work upon the self*. As a result, suggest Boltanski and Chiapello, each individual comes to be seen as responsible for his or her own body, image, success, and ultimately destiny.²⁰⁷

In some of the more speculative passages of their book, Boltanski and Chiapello suggest that the prevailing trend of short-termism in the labour market may have spilled over into the sphere of personal relations, as demonstrated by the decline in marriage rates and the tendency towards 'casual' cohabitations without any formal documentation.²⁰⁸ Their intuitions are confirmed by other researchers working more specifically within the sociology of interpersonal relations. Thus Jean-Claude Guillebaud suggests that the institution of the family begins to lose its importance just as traditional companies based on the hierarchical model of the family disappear leaving only 'share-holders in search of markets and consumers in search of products'.²⁰⁹ Somewhat more precisely, Jean Claude Bologne notes that marriage rates have actually been on the rise again in recent years, but so too have rates of divorce and of people living alone. Bologne too deduces a casualisation of intimate relationships in which marriage would take its place within 'une sorte de "vie active" sentimentale qui connaîtrait, elle aussi, ses

périodes de chômage, ses changements d'employeurs [...] et sa retraite'.²¹⁰ More generally, Guillebaud complains that the discourses surrounding both sex and economics have undergone a parallel restriction in recent years such that the only tenable position with respect to both becomes a kind of ultra-liberalism; the alternatives – a socialist Utopia in one case, a disciplinarian puritanism in the other – having been discredited, there appears frustratingly little room for ideological manoeuvre between what are, after all, extreme poles of both arguments.²¹¹ Meanwhile, the trend for self-auditing that rules the commercial sector, together with the tyranny of statistics, leads each individual to evaluate his or her own sexuality in terms of desirable statistical norms, which can only lead to a spirit of competition, in this domain as in every other.²¹²

In Houellebecq's novels, from the very beginning, sex and sexlessness are frequently mentioned in the same breath as work and economics, as though to imply that both domains come under broadly the same set of rules. Thus the narrator of *Extension* notes that he has 'déjà un joli pouvoir d'achat' ('a tidy purchasing power' (EDL, 15; 13)) with good prospects in his company, but that 'Sur le plan sexuel [...] la réussite est moins éclatante' (EDL, 15; 13).²¹³ He confesses that since splitting up with his girlfriend he has not had sex in over two years: 'Mais en réalité, surtout quand on travaille, ça passe très vite' (EDL, 15; 13).²¹⁴ Ironically, though, as we have already seen, however close the two spheres of activity may appear in terms of their discursive framing, the world of work singularly fails – if only because of the premium placed on *time*²¹⁵ – to provide opportunities to form meaningful, intimate relationships. The narrator's therapist 'précise sa pensée en me parlant des "possibilités de rapports sociaux" offertes par le travail. J'éclate de rire, à sa légère surprise' (EDL, 132; 132).²¹⁶ Instead, the real influence of business over sexuality is in providing the model for a quantification of sexual value. Houellebecq has perhaps set out this argument most clearly in 'Approches du désarroi'. He suggests that just as the symbolic value of certain professions has become increasingly irrelevant in a context where annual income and hours worked are all that really matter, in the same way sexual attraction has gradually been reduced to a series of objective criteria: age, height, weight and vital statistics. Crucially, though, 'Si la hiérarchie économique simplifiée fit longtemps l'objet d'oppositions sporadiques (mouvements en faveur de la "justice sociale"), il est à noter que la hiérarchie érotique, perçue comme plus naturelle, fut rapidement intériorisée et fit d'emblée l'objet d'un large consensus' (I, 66; I2, 30/RV, 45).²¹⁷ As Guillebaud comments, when sexuality becomes subject

to such a brutally reductive market logic, it necessarily leads to narrow definitions and limited choices for individuals: 'Le tri est brutal, sans nuances ni accommodements. On peut payer ou non. On est contraint de vendre son corps ou pas. On est jugé performant ou sans valeur'.²¹⁸ When sex is so clearly marked with its value, suggests Houellebecq in *Les Particules élémentaires*, relationships have little to do with love and everything to do with narcissism. When young people go out with each other, they look upon it as 'une activité de loisirs, un divertissement où inter[viennent] à parts plus ou moins égales le plaisir sexuel et la satisfaction narcissique' (*PE*, 282; 339).²¹⁹ Elsewhere, Houellebecq has insisted that this quest for narcissistic gratification has in fact become the primary goal of sexual activity, over and above physical pleasure (*I*, 42–3/*I2*, 58). It is for this reason, too, that our culture places ever more value on youth: within the context of a quantified sexual value, the return guaranteed by the erotic appeal of young people appears as simple economic logic: 'Le désir sexuel se porte essentiellement sur les corps jeunes, et l'investissement progressif du champ de la séduction par les très jeunes filles ne fut au fond qu'un retour à la normale, un retour à la vérité du désir analogue à ce retour à la vérité des prix qui suit une surchauffe boursière anormale' (*PE*, 106; 125).²²⁰

All of the above observations bring us to the central thesis in Houellebecq's work, most forcefully expressed in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. Sexuality, argues Houellebecq, is a system of social differentiation and hierarchisation, structurally parallel to that of money, just as ruthless as just as capable of producing 'des phénomènes de *paupérisation absolue*' ('phenomena of *absolute pauperization*' (*EDL*, 100; 99)). 'En système économique parfaitement libéral, certains accumulent des fortunes considérables; d'autres croupissent dans le chômage et la misère. En système sexuel parfaitement libéral, certains ont une vie érotique variée et excitante; d'autres sont réduits à la masturbation et la solitude' (*EDL*, 100; 99).²²¹ Houellebecq's poetry makes frequent reference to both forms of marginalisation, their existence as two sides of the same coin evoked through imagery of day and night, both approached with equal terror: the day because it brings the demands of conforming to a capitalist lifestyle; the night because it forces the poet back into contemplation of his erotic worthlessness, and concomitant solitude. The key to Houellebecq's frustration, across these various passages, is not so much – or not only – the parallel existence of these two regimes, but rather the fact that *there is nothing else*, there is no other way to achieve long-term personal satisfaction in life. Bruno confronts the stark reality of our

value system when he realises the profound irrelevance of Proust to his high-school students: ‘La duchesse de Guermantes avait beaucoup moins de *thune* que Snoop Doggy Dog [*sic*]; Snoop Doggy Dog avait moins de *thune* que Bill Gates, mais il faisait davantage *mouiller* les filles. Deux paramètres, pas plus’ (*PE*, 192–3; 231).²²²

Although these passages undoubtedly constitute some of the most frequently cited in discussions of Houellebecq, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the context of their presentation.²²³ The thesis presented herein tends almost to be advanced as a kind of stand-alone summation of Houellebecq’s views, but, despite the fact that he has made comparable remarks in non-fiction texts, most notably ‘Approches du désarroi’, we should not lose sight of the fact that the above examples are embedded within a literary narrative. How seriously, therefore, should we take the central thesis of *Extension* when it is put forward by a somewhat dubious narrator who, as we have already seen, is seriously depressed and still bitter about his break-up with a girlfriend two years ago? The narrator riffs on the same theme later in conversation with his psychiatrist: ‘Il y a un système basé sur la domination, l’argent et la peur – un système plutôt masculin [...]; il y a un système féminin basé sur la séduction et le sexe [...]. Et c’est tout [...] Maupassant a cru qu’il n’y avait rien d’autre; et ceci l’a conduit jusqu’à la folie furieuse’ (*EDL*, 147; 147).²²⁴ The psychiatrist points out that Maupassant in fact died of syphilis. How much credence should we give to Bruno’s rant about his students’ narrow criteria of value when we know that he is masturbating behind his desk? Most particularly, we should note that the first and most blunt statement of the thesis that ‘La sexualité est un système de hiérarchie social’ (*EDL*, 93; 92)²²⁵ occurs in the context of one of the animal stories that periodically interrupt the narrative of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. The story is presented as a ‘Dialogue between a Dachshund and a Poodle’ (‘Dialogue d’un teckel et d’un caniche’ (*EDL*, 84; 83)) in which one of the dogs draws conclusions about human society based on the observation of behaviour including the unfortunate fate of Brigitte Bardot, cited at length above. Not only is the whole discussion therefore cast in a rather absurd light, but the actual presentation of the conclusion about sexual hierarchy is surrounded by hyperbolic rhetoric such as this: ‘laissant s’allumer d’eux-mêmes dans vos cerveaux les candélabres de la stupéfaction, je continuerai à dérouler les anneaux de mon raisonnement avec la silencieuse modération du crotale’ (*EDL*, 93; 92).²²⁶ If this were not enough to question the seriousness of the conclusions drawn, the first narrator specifies at the end of the chapter

that his animal story remained ‘unfinished’, and that anyway ‘le teckel s’endormait avant la fin du discours du caniche’ (EDL, 96; 95).²²⁷ ‘Enfin j’étais jeune,’ he concludes, ‘je m’amusais’ (‘I was young, I was having fun’ (EDL, 96; 95)). Houellebecq appears, then, with these techniques, to be deliberately distancing himself from his own sociological conclusions. Yet Carole Sweeney wonders whether this strategy might be designed specifically to refuse the recuperation and recycling of Houellebecq’s argument as one more piece of merchandise to be circulated on the market. As Sweeney writes, these bizarre animal tales ‘point to a textual space outside of exchange value, a place for thought that has no truck with the niceties of literary good taste’.²²⁸

In such a ludic and uncertain context, though, how much justification can there be to grant a political significance to Houellebecq’s thesis? Houellebecq’s rhetoric partakes of what we might call a degraded discourse of struggle. It is in the key passage establishing the centrality of the sexual hierarchy that we find the lines that contain the title of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*: ‘Le libéralisme économique, c’est l’extension du domaine de la lutte, son extension à tous les âges de la vie et à toutes les classes de la société. De même, le libéralisme sexuel, c’est l’extension du domaine de la lutte, son extension à tous les âges de la vie et à toutes les classes de la société’ (EDL, 100; 99).²²⁹ The key word *lutte* (‘struggle’) occurs a couple more times in the novel. In Rouen, the narrator reads that students have been demonstrating and railway workers on strike, and comments: ‘Le monde continuait, donc. La lutte continuait’ (EDL, 79; 78).²³⁰ Following Tisserand’s sudden death in a car accident, the narrator remarks, ‘Au moins [...], il se sera battu jusqu’au bout [...] je sais que dans son cœur il y avait encore la lutte, le désir et la volonté de la lutte’ (EDL, 121; 120).²³¹ The word is hardly innocent, bringing with it a long tradition of Marxist rhetoric. Marc Weitzmann has suggested, somewhat glibly, that if there is a proletariat of sex, then Michel Houellebecq is their prophet, their Karl Marx.²³² Perhaps rather more seriously he has proposed that Houellebecq responds to a certain nostalgia for the proletariat on the part of the middle classes, the sense of two or three generations (since the baby boom) of being spectators of, rather than actors in, history.²³³ At the same time, though, we might argue that the struggle Houellebecq describes is as much a neo-Darwinian ‘struggle for life’ as it is a post-Marxist class struggle (this question will be explored further in Chapter 3, below); and, as Robert Dion points out, both the domain of the rule and the domain of the struggle, in *Extension*, ultimately come across as equally

undesirable.²³⁴ Houellebecq himself has somewhat cryptically suggested that the title of his first novel ‘pouvait être lu pour le contraire de ce qu’il signifie’.²³⁵ Nonetheless, this is the same author who has declared, in interview, that the guiding spirit of all his work is ‘l’intuition que l’univers est basé sur la séparation, la souffrance et le mal; la décision de décrire cet état de choses, et peut-être de le dépasser [...] L’acte initial est le refus radical du monde tel quel’ (*I*, 39/12, 55).²³⁶ However ambivalent such a statement might be (the fact that Houellebecq says ‘the universe’ rather than ‘society’ implies a metaphysical, as much as a political, understanding; the notion of ‘separation’ has a long conceptual history, from Hegel, through Marx, to Guy Debord, but it is unclear in what sense Houellebecq intends it), it is this notion of radical refusal – which is frequently discernible too in the text of the novels and poetry – that may allow for Houellebecq’s recuperation as a political writer. If nothing else, Houellebecq’s analysis of the parallel development of sexual consumerism and labour under capitalism implies that the former domain has as much need of organised political resistance as the latter.²³⁷ In a passage that recalls the descriptions of emotional labour above, Houellebecq notes that

le modèle sexuel proposé par la culture officielle (publicité, magazines, organismes sociaux et de santé publique) était celui de *l’aventure*: à l’intérieur d’un tel système le désir et le plaisir apparaissent à l’issue d’un processus de *séduction*, mettant en avant la nouveauté, la passion et la créativité individuelle (qualités par ailleurs requises des employés dans le cadre de leur vie professionnelle).²³⁸ (*PE*, 244; 293)

As a result, just as in the examples of emotional labour, individuals can become irretrievably alienated from their sexuality by the sense that even moments of sexual happiness are coopted to the ideology of consumption. Of Michel and Annabelle, Houellebecq writes: ‘De retour à Paris ils connurent des instants joyeux, analogues aux publicités de parfum’ (*PE*, 239; 285).²³⁹ At the very least, we might argue that the political significance of Houellebecq’s writing is in seeking a different way of viewing sexuality, somewhat as Jean-Claude Guillebaud does in his book *La Tyrannie du plaisir*. As Guillebaud suggests, a position somewhere between nostalgic moralism, on the one hand, and irresponsible libertarianism on the other, would be the only really habitable position.²⁴⁰ Michel Houellebecq’s novels, whose unrepentant thirst for sexual experience is matched by a dispassionate critique of the real conditions of sexual interaction, are in search of just such a ground.

For Houellebecq, so-called sexual liberation cannot succeed because of the problem of individualism. This is where Aldous Huxley was mistaken in imagining the Utopia of *Brave New World* (1932).²⁴¹ The death of God and the effective end of Christianity's reign over social and mental organisation gives rise to two parallel phenomena, in Houellebecq's analysis: rationalism and individualism, the latter heightened by the acute awareness of death that comes with the former. Now, if it is rationally conceivable to construct a society in which wealth is equitably distributed and everyone is sexually satisfied (with sexuality effectively divorced from procreation), this is to reckon without individualism. The continued requirement for sexuality, and wealth, to act as factors of narcissistic differentiation serve to maintain inequality (*PE*, 160–1; 191). Jean-Claude Guillebaud suggests that, in this context, sexuality becomes an essentially solitary affair. He argues that the contemporary preference for the rather neutral term 'partner' is revelatory in this regard: a partner is little more than a masturbatory tool, a more or less efficient instrument susceptible to trials, evaluations and comparisons, while the only real prohibition remaining in the field of desire – a lack of desire on the part of the partner – is greeted with impatience, if not exasperation.²⁴² As Houellebecq reminds us in his customarily hyperbolic way, 'La conséquence logique de l'individualisme c'est le meurtre' ('The logical consequence of individualism is murder' (*I*, 47/*I2*, 63)). Houellebecq's rejection of the ideology of liberal individualism is frequently blunt and uncompromising. One of his poems, entitled 'Dernier rempart contre le libéralisme' begins:

Nous refusons l'idéologie libérale parce qu'elle est
incapable de fournir un sens, une voie à la
réconciliation de l'individu avec son semblable dans
une communauté qu'on pourrait qualifier d'humaine,
Et d'ailleurs le but qu'elle se propose est même tout
différent.²⁴³ (*Po*, 52)

The rather abrupt presentation of the poem, shorn of all pretense to rhyme and metre, conveys the brutal urgency of the sentiment. The poem is similarly intransigent in its closing lines:

C'est que l'individu, je veux parler de l'individu humain,
est très généralement un petit animal à la fois cruel et
misérable,
Et qu'il serait bien vain de lui faire confiance à moins
qu'il ne se voie repoussé, enclos et maintenu dans les

principes rigoureux d'une morale inattaquable,
Ce qui n'est pas le cas.²⁴⁴ (*Po*, 53)

Houellebecq, in other words, pleads in favour of a kind of moral absolutism and against the reigning ideology of tolerance, 'ce pauvre stigmaté de l'âge' ('poor stigmata of our age' (*RV*, 27)). In *Rester vivant*, he goes as far as to declare: 'Vous devez haïr la liberté de toutes vos forces' ('You must learn to hate freedom with all your might' (*RV*, 27)).

In the novels, the distanced, historical perspective of the narration, especially in *Les Particules élémentaires*, tends to work to prevent the characters from being seen as free individuals. Bruno, for instance, is described as being nothing more than 'l'élément passif du déploiement d'un mouvement historique' (*PE*, 178; 212).²⁴⁵ A similar effect is achieved through the use of scientific language and concepts which serve almost to disqualify the bourgeois humanist notion of individual liberty. This begins in *Extension* where a computer-programmer colleague of the narrator's compares society to the human brain with individuals as brain cells and freedom conceived as the multiplication of possibilities of connection between cells. The narrator, however, is sceptical, considering the metaphor meaningless in the absence of 'un projet d'unification' ('a unifying project' (*EDL*, 40; 38)) to hold all this activity together. Besides, he suggests, the comparison is a little derisory when 'freedom' means little more than choosing your dinner by Minitel. But the discussion of individual freedom in terms of neurological activity persists in *Les Particules élémentaires* where it is used to justify the assertion of behavioural determinism:

les échanges d'électrons entre les neurones et les synapses à l'intérieur du cerveau sont en principe soumis à l'imprévisibilité quantique; le grand nombre de neurones fait cependant, par annulation statistique des différences élémentaires, que le comportement humain est – dans ses grandes lignes comme dans ses détails – aussi rigoureusement déterminé que celui de tout autre système naturel.²⁴⁶ (*PE*, 92; 108)

Much of this science is rather vague, and some of it probably groundless, but there are two good reasons for this. First, some of the science properly belongs to the realm of fiction – and is therefore necessarily sketchy – since it is Michel's discoveries that are the basis for the generation of a cloned posthuman race that surpasses the problem of individual consciousness. But, secondly, Houellebecq's discussions take place on the fringes of human knowledge. He is clear that the origins of consciousness, although probably located in the brain, remain largely

mysterious and, in this context, the Darwinian argument that it provides some kind of evolutionary advantage is little more than ‘une aimable reconstruction mythique’ (‘Just So stories’ (PE, 225; 268)). Houellebecq has gone further in interview, suggesting that the answer probably lies in the quantum level of the brain and, as such, belongs to a domain that is inaccessible to our current categories of thought – which he sees as all the more reason to abandon them in favour of new ways of conceiving of the world (I, 48/I2, 64).

In the meantime, though, the ideology of individualism is causing considerable damage to our societies. In particular, Houellebecq’s work repeatedly stresses the declining influence of the family. The family, he argues in *Les Particules élémentaires*, was the last bastion of communitarianism separating the individual from the brutal laws of market forces. With the inexorable rise of the individual in the twentieth century, even this micro-community has ceased to play much of a role. The idea of a heritage transmitted across generations has lost all meaning when most adults have little material wealth and very few skills (in the sense of a craft or trade) to pass on. Besides, reserving one’s savings for one’s children would prevent one’s own full enjoyment of life, which is sacrosanct. As Houellebecq puts it, ‘Accepter l’idéologie du changement continu c’est accepter que la vie d’un homme soit strictement réduite à son existence individuelle, et que les générations passées et futures n’aient plus aucune importance à ses yeux’ (PE, 169; 201).²⁴⁷ In this context, children are far from desirable; on the contrary: ‘L’enfant c’est le piège qui s’est refermé, c’est l’ennemi qu’on va devoir continuer à entretenir, et qui va vous survivre’ (PE, 169; 201).²⁴⁸ *Les Particules élémentaires* serves as the demonstration of this thesis. Both Bruno and Michel are abandoned by their selfish parents at an early age, with the emotional consequences we know. Of Bruno’s parents, the narrator writes: ‘Les soins fastidieux que réclame l’élevage d’un enfant jeune parurent vite au couple peu compatibles avec leur idéal de liberté personnelle’ (PE, 28; 28).²⁴⁹ Bruno’s father ‘lui voulait plutôt du bien, à condition que ça ne prenne pas trop de temps’ (PE, 48; 53).²⁵⁰ Much later in life, Bruno bumps into his father in a Thai massage parlour and the older man does not even recognise him. The failed paternal relationship reproduces itself in the succeeding generation. The fact that we only learn of the existence of Bruno’s son about halfway into the novel is a good indication of how important the boy is in his father’s life. When his son comes to stay with him for a while, Bruno realises that they have absolutely nothing to say to each other. In fact, Bruno’s principal

emotion with regard to his son is jealousy: he is tormented by the idea that the boy 'allait peut-être réussir sa vie alors que j'avais raté la mienne' (*PE*, 186; 223).²⁵¹

Christiane's relationship with her son is no better. She has become actively afraid of him since he started hanging around with the wrong crowd and confesses that, if he died in a motorcycle accident, 'j'aurais de la peine, mais je crois que je me sentirais plus libre' (*PE*, 214; 257).²⁵² Again, Houellebecq's observations about the incompatibility of family life with a culture of ruthless individualism are shared by sociological commentators. Jean Claude Bologne suggests that the lifestyle of the single person has nowadays become the ideal, such that married couples often live out a kind of 'égoïsme à deux', more like the juxtaposition of two single lives rather than the formation of a life specific to the couple, enjoying separate cars, separate holidays, sometimes even separate homes.²⁵³ The very idea of 'settling down' has come to be seen as a hindrance to personal fulfilment. Guillebaud too suggests that an ultra-liberal consumer market would prefer to deal with employees and consumers that are free from ties and responsibilities.²⁵⁴ This is surely, however, a little overstated. Anyone who has tried to change their name, their marital status, their job or even just their address (heaven forbid their sex!) will know that the structures organising our society are actually a lot less flexible than this discourse of nomadic lifestyles would imply.²⁵⁵ The truth about contemporary capitalism is probably somewhat closer to the schizophrenic nature of capital identified by Deleuze and Guattari in *L'Anti-Œdipe* – a system that seeks to release energy on the one hand and store or bind it on the other, that encourages spending one minute and saving the next.²⁵⁶ Thus, on the one hand the free movement of capital encourages individuals to be flexible, ready to switch jobs, lifestyles and opinions with the next change in the market, but, on the other hand, an older tradition of surveillance, cataloguing and control likes to have each individual assigned to a recognisable category with a career, a home and a marital status that remain relatively stable. From this latter perspective, the loosening of the family's stranglehold over social organisation can still be regarded as a positive development. As Jeffrey Weeks argues, it is after all 'productive of creative efforts at coexistence',²⁵⁷ as the proliferation of non-traditional families will testify. Weeks takes a stand against the naysayers and doom-mongers of the social-breakdown hypothesis, insisting that 'the new individualism is about more than doing your own thing. It is about developing forms of autonomy that are also profoundly social'.²⁵⁸

Be that as it may, the evidence suggests that this individualism is, after all, having serious consequences for people's mental health. In his history of depression, Alain Ehrenberg stresses that it is essentially a modern disease coinciding with the increased demand for individual initiative and people's accompanying feelings of inadequacy. It is, for Ehrenberg, '*une maladie de la responsabilité* [...] Le déprimé [...] est fatigué d'avoir à devenir lui-même'.²⁵⁹ When the narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* is told by his psychiatrist that he must try to focus on himself, he replies, 'Mais j'en ai un peu assez, de moi-même' (EDL, 145; 145).²⁶⁰ Houellebecq's argument is that individualism, ultimately, is boring, sterile and empty. Today's young people, he suggests, may be resistant to romantic passion for fear of being dependent on someone else but 'la disparition des tourments passionnels laissait en effet le champ libre à l'ennui, à la sensation de vide, à l'attente angoissée du vieillissement et de la mort' (PE, 283; 339).²⁶¹ *Les Particules élémentaires* is repeatedly marked by the idea of escaping from individual consciousness. Bruno remembers an occasion when he overheard his parents talking about him: 'Il est toujours curieux d'entendre les autres parler de soi, surtout quand ils ne semblent pas avoir conscience de votre présence. On peut avoir tendance à en perdre conscience soi-même, ce n'est pas déplaisant' (PE, 42; 46).²⁶² Later, at the Lieu du Changement, Bruno takes a moment out from the activities: 'il ne demandait plus rien, il ne cherchait plus rien, il n'était plus nulle part; lentement et par degrés son esprit montait vers le royaume du non-être, vers la pure extase de la non-présence au monde. Pour la première fois depuis l'âge de treize ans, Bruno se sentit presque heureux' (PE, 131; 154).²⁶³ Meanwhile, Michel has a dream in which he sees space as separated into a sphere of being and a second sphere of non-being: 'Calmement, sans hésiter, il se retourna et se dirigea vers la seconde sphère' (PE, 236; 282).²⁶⁴ This persistent desire to lose consciousness obviously culminates in the novel's science-fictional finale with the creation of a cloned future race for whom the individual self has ceased to be meaningful. But if this is an extreme and utopian solution to the malaise diagnosed by Houellebecq, it is worth mentioning that at the end of 'Approches du désarroi' he offers a much more modest and practical form of resistance. Every individual, argues Houellebecq, is capable of launching their own 'cold revolution' against the tyrannical flow of information and advertising by placing themselves momentarily outside it, simply by 'stepping aside' ('faire un pas de côté' (I, 80/I2, 45/RV, 54)). Houellebecq's advice is to turn off the television and the radio, not buy anything, not even think about buying anything, suspend all mental

activity: 'Il suffit, littéralement, de s'immobiliser quelques secondes' (*I*, 80/12, 45/RV, 55).²⁶⁵ This quiet, private revolution, although hardly likely to shake the institutions of capitalism to their foundations, is at least the beginning of a refusal to allow the pace, shape and character of one's life to be entirely determined by the movement of markets. There is perhaps a similarity between Houellebecq's 'pas de côté' and the similarly minimal form of resistance that Boltanski and Chiapello suggest can be achieved in the face of the new spirit of capitalism, simply by *slowing down*:

Un pas dans le sens d'une libération passe peut-être aujourd'hui par la possibilité de ralentir le rythme des connexions, sans craindre pour autant de ne plus exister pour les autres, de sombrer dans l'oubli et, à terme, dans 'l'exclusion'; de différer l'engagement dans un projet ou le moment de rendre public un travail et de le donner en partage – par exemple dans une exposition ou un colloque –, sans craindre pour autant de voir la reconnaissance à laquelle on pense avoir droit appropriée par un autre; de s'attarder dans un projet en cours, dont on n'avait pas vu d'emblée toutes les possibilités; de retarder le moment de l'épreuve et peut-être, plus généralement, non pas de supprimer les épreuves – ce qui ne manquerait pas de susciter de violents sentiments d'injustices – mais de les espacer.²⁶⁶

Other aspects of Houellebecq's apparent conclusion are, however, more questionable. He argues, reasonably enough, that the rampant selfishness of individual consumerism needs to be checked by a sense of duty, claiming for instance: 'on doit faire en sorte que le bonheur d'un autre être dépende de votre existence' (*I*, 41/12, 57)²⁶⁷ and 'la seule supériorité que je reconnaisse, c'est la bonté' (*I*, 41/12, 57).²⁶⁸ But his work is marked by a certain nostalgia for tenderness that is frequently coloured by dubious gendered assumptions. There have indeed been human beings who worked hard their whole life out of love and devotion for others, notes the narrator of *Les Particules*, 'En pratique, ces êtres humains étaient généralement des femmes' (*PE*, 91; 107).²⁶⁹ At the Lieu du Changement, when a woman responds to one of Bruno's sarcastic barbs by telling him 'Tu as dû pas mal souffrir' ('You must have really suffered' (*PE*, 134; 157)), he muses: 'Les femmes, parfois, étaient tellement gentilles; elles répondaient à l'agressivité par la compréhension, au cynisme par la douceur' (*PE*, 134; 158).²⁷⁰ Michel comes to a similar conclusion by watching wildlife documentaries: 'Au milieu de cette saloperie immonde, de ce carnage permanent qu'était la nature animale, la seule trace de dévouement et d'altruisme était représentée par l'amour maternel, ou

par un instinct de protection, enfin quelque chose qui insensiblement et par degrés conduisait à l'amour maternel [...] décidément, les femmes étaient meilleures que les hommes' (*PE*, 164; 195–6).²⁷¹ As a result, the new race to which Michel's research eventually gives rise will effectively represent, at least in part, a feminisation of humanity. *Les Particules élémentaires*, for all its cynical rhetoric, and for all its apparently cold, posthumanist vision, actually has a deeply romantic ending. Michel's disciple Hubczejak claims that by removing individual freedom from the equation Michel's research reinvented the conditions of possibility for love. And if he was able to do this, it was because he himself experienced love with Annabelle. In this happy ending then, Annabelle's unhappy life and early death, together with Michel's passive cruelty, which was partly responsible, are both redeemed, through science, for future generations of (post)humanity. Meanwhile Houellebecq, in interview, has made unequivocal calls for a new, matriarchal organisation of human life, since men, apparently, are useless and frequently dangerous.²⁷² As Bruno puts it in *Les Particules*: 'les hommes sont incapables d'éprouver de l'amour, c'est un sentiment qui leur est totalement étranger' (*PE*, 168; 200).²⁷³ But, as Luis de Miranda has protested, this kind of romantic discourse about women is ultimately unhelpful since it consigns women to the subordinate role they have always had, while forcing men into a position of masochism.²⁷⁴ As Miranda asks, what if the supposed tender instincts of women were in fact a strategy of survival of a class of people living in a relation of social domination? Arlie Hochschild has pointed out that women's loving qualities may not be as natural as many men like to think, but precisely an example of the kind of emotional labour that has only been criticised as it has become more visible: 'As a matter of tradition, emotion management has been better understood and more often used by women as one of the offerings they trade for economic support. Especially among dependent women of the middle and upper classes, women have the job (or think they ought to) of creating the emotional tone of social encounters'.²⁷⁵ He goes on: 'when we redefine "adaptability" and "cooperativeness" as a form of shadow labor, we are pointing to a hidden cost for which some recompense is due and suggesting that a general reordering of female–male relationships is desirable'.²⁷⁶

Houellebecq has claimed that, contrary to appearances, there is in fact some 'good news' in *Les Particules élémentaires*. He lists four positive conclusions: (1) the reign of materialism is coming to an end; (2) women continue to be capable of love; (3) the practical means of

defeating death is within our grasp; (4) the search for knowledge does not lead to unhappiness, but perhaps to a rather abstract kind of joy.²⁷⁷ On the basis of these conclusions, Marc Weitzmann has argued that Houellebecq is a 'utopian communist'.²⁷⁸ I would be more inclined to agree with Liam McNamara that he is, at best, 'pre-revolutionary, unenlightened by any notion of praxis to transform the new sexual means of production'.²⁷⁹ In fact, an alternative set of 'good news' at the end of Virginie Despentes's book *King Kong Théorie* provides a welcome counterpoint to Houellebecq's position. Despentes writes, 'Échec du travail? Échec de la famille? Bonnes nouvelles. Qui remettent en cause, automatiquement, la virilité? Autre bonne nouvelle. On en a soupé, de ces conneries'.²⁸⁰ Although Houellebecq's diagnosis of our current sexual malaise is incisive, unforgettable and largely accurate, perhaps it is time to stop blaming a long-overdue historical transition for all our hang-ups and start getting on with our present purpose of redefining the form and function of our social and sexual relations in ways that allow, encourage and require us, finally, to respect one another.

Houellebecq's political position is ultimately difficult to pin down, and the more one reads of his work, the more confusing and contradictory his stance can appear. On the one hand, Houellebecq appears highly critical of the individualism encouraged by capitalist democracy, suggesting that it is responsible for the breakdown of the family, social isolation and sexual misery and may even be leading the human species into a demographic impasse. On the other hand, however, the majority of Houellebecq's characters are guilty of precisely that individualistic behaviour that elsewhere they condemn. Thus these characters (both women and men, although men are perhaps the worst culprits) neglect their children, they allow professional success to take precedent over long-term relationships, they abandon partners who are growing old and losing their physical charm, they chase after sexual adventures with ever younger targets in which the satisfaction to be derived must be at least partially narcissistic. The key to understanding what may initially appear simply as hypocrisy perhaps lies in two different understandings of individualism. First, there is the humanist understanding, which, from a belief in self-determination, instructs us that, beyond a certain age, each individual is responsible for the shape and character of his or her own life. When harnessed to a liberal capitalist economy that defines choice in terms of different types of acquisition, this necessarily gives rise to some selfishness of behaviour as individuals learn to treat

their relationships, their career and even their own personality traits as objects to be acquired but also as indicators of value in future social and economic transactions (although the distinction between social and economic tends to lose its meaning here, and this is one of Houellebecq's most striking lessons). Faced with this kind of individualism, and the objectification it tends to operate among people and relationships, Houellebecq sometimes – albeit rarely – succumbs to a nostalgia for an era when families and other micro-communities played a more significant role, and he occasionally falls into the essentialist trap of idealising maternal love without sufficient recognition of the historical conditions that left generations of women with no choice but to devote their lives to their husbands and children.

But there is a second type of individualism evoked in Houellebecq's work that we might describe as posthumanist and that complicates this picture. This view would suggest that human self-determination is, in fact, very limited: indeed, that the very concepts of free will and intentional development are misleading. Instead, it suggests that human behaviour arises out of a complex, but nonetheless entirely determined, set of causes that include evolutionary instincts, physical, genetic and neurobiological constraints, cultural norms and infant socialisation. Our range of possible responses to any given situation might be somewhat greater and less predictable than that of, say, a chimpanzee, but it is nonetheless determined by a series of factors of which we may only be dimly aware in the moment. From this posthumanist perspective, then, if human beings are individualistic, it is because they are animals like any other and concerned above all with their own survival. Social relations (families, clans, etc.) emerged at an earlier stage in the life of our species as a means of ensuring the survival of individuals within a hostile environment, just as other animals congregate in herds for their own protection or hunt in packs for maximum efficiency. Arguably, however, in our advanced technological societies – and especially in western social democracies where the basic needs of all are guaranteed by the state – these small-scale social units no longer serve an essential function and, for some, they can be seen to hinder the individual's full enjoyment of the resources the world has to offer. This understanding of the world seems to lie behind the cold logic of the isolated protagonists in *Plateforme* and *La Carte et le territoire*. This type of individualism is also destructive of families, but to ascribe it to wilful selfishness would be to ignore its much deeper historical causes. It is perhaps the difficulty of separating these two individualisms that leads Houellebecq

to the extreme solutions of his science-fiction Utopias, which many readers have seen as depressing visions, drastic failures to think through our common plight. As we will see in Chapter 3, the cloned future of *La Possibilité d'une île*, in particular, eradicates individualism as we understand it, but at the cost of society as a whole. Abandoning all social interaction appears as the only way out of individualism's aporia. In the next chapter, we will see how Houellebecq brings these stark conclusions to bear on the social questions arising from economic globalisation in *Plateforme* and *La Carte et le territoire*.

CHAPTER TWO

Work and Leisure

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

Plateforme

Plateforme, Houellebecq's third novel and, in many ways, his most controversial, can also be seen as a synthesis of his two preceding novels. Like *Extension du domaine de la lutte* it gives extensive, often satirical, coverage to the professional activities of white-collar office workers. Like *Extension* and *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998) it presents contemporary western society as a place where sexuality is a fraught, painful and disappointing experience for all but an elect few. And, like *Les Particules*, it conceives of a radical, utopian solution to this sexual impasse. Pierre Varrod, in an early appraisal of the novel, went further: he suggests that if *Extension* showed us the lives of those excluded from sexual relations and *Les Particules* documented a sexualised society from which all possibility of love had disappeared, the redemptive narrative of *Plateforme* unites sex and love in the narrator Michel's tender but very torrid relationship with Valérie. As such, Varrod concludes, *Plateforme* can be considered the novel of Houellebecq's maturity.¹ In this chapter, I

have chosen not to address this relationship at any length, partly because, as Varrod and other commentators have recognised, the character of Valérie comes across more as a fantasy figure than as a flesh-and-blood woman. She is beautiful, intelligent and successful, invariably gentle and understanding, but also, in the words of David Lehardy Sweet, ‘a sexual dynamo whose primary goal in life seems to be to get Michel off’.² I have argued elsewhere³ that Michel’s relationship with Valérie reads so much like a pornographic fantasy that it is sometimes tempting to dismiss the entire middle section of the novel as a kind of extended dream sequence concocted by Houellebecq’s otherwise hapless and lonely narrator. Instead of this central relationship, then, this section will concentrate on those aspects of *Plateforme* that made it so controversial: the proposal for a generalised sex tourism as a logical economic response to the current sexual malaise; and the provocative comments about race and religion that accompany Houellebecq’s touristic narrative.

Economics

At one point in *Plateforme*, the narrator Michel relates his ongoing experiment to test the hypothesis that one can gain an adequate sense of the historical movement of the world by reading nothing but the business and economy sections of the newspaper. With typical Houellebecqian irony, Michel mutters that the only definite conclusion he has so far reached is that ‘l’économie était effroyablement ennuyeuse’ (‘economics was unspeakably boring’ (P, 271; 281)). But the point is made: *Plateforme* is a novel determinedly grounded in economic realities and, as Pierre Varrod remarks, the sheer amount of detail accorded here to company life and professional trajectories is without precedent in the contemporary French novel.⁴ More than ever, people in *Plateforme* are defined by their professional role and status. Michel describes a colleague named Cécilia in his office as ‘une CDD, voire une TUC, quelqu’un en résumé d’assez négligeable’ (P, 22; 16).⁵ As in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, if the narrator himself finds it difficult to fulfil a professional role without being assailed by a sense of absurdity, he nonetheless dimly acknowledges that such a role played with confidence and conviction can assert a powerful erotic appeal. He is aroused when Valérie dresses in a tight-fitting suit for a business meeting, what she calls her ‘tenue de séductrice institutionnelle’ (‘corporate seductress outfit’ (P, 266; 276)). But a similar professional magnetism is exerted by men, as when Michel is seized by ‘une sympathie irraisonnée, anormale’⁶ for a police captain who takes his statement following the murder of his father

(*P*, 19; 13). The novel also contains warm, if rather baffled, portraits of a bank manager (*P*, 29; 24–5) and various company directors, including the German Gottfried Rembke, the very model of a business executive: ‘On l’imaginait sauter dans sa journée avec enthousiasme, se lever du lit d’un bond et faire une demi-heure de vélo d’appartement avant de se diriger vers son bureau dans sa Mercedes flambant neuve en écoutant les informations économiques’ (*P*, 267–8; 277).⁷ Valérie’s boss, Jean-Yves, is similarly the object of Michel’s puzzled admiration – his tremendous success cannot be explained away by the desire for wealth: ‘Son ambition, existant par elle-même, ne pouvait être ramenée à aucune autre cause [...] En réalité, Jean-Yves travaillait parce qu’il avait le goût du travail; c’était à la fois mystérieux et limpide’ (*P*, 296; 307–8).⁸

But *Plateforme* not only indulges in this somewhat mystificatory (or at least mystified) fetishisation of professional status; the novel is also careful to quantify it in measurable terms. Michel, for instance, inherits from his dead father ‘ce qu’un ouvrier non qualifié pouvait espérer gagner, en Europe occidentale, au cours d’une vie de labeur’ (*P*, 28; 24).⁹ We are told that Valérie earns 40,000 francs per month but that, bearing in mind her 40 per cent tax contribution and her monthly rent of 10,000 francs, this works out to less than it initially appears (*P*, 139–40; 142–3). The narrator notes, in American popular fiction, an obsession with long working hours as a badge of elite status: characters in John Grisham’s *The Firm* work eighty to ninety hours per week, and in David Baldacci’s *Total Control* ninety to 110 hours (*P*, 55, 92; 51, 90). Later we are told that Jean-Yves himself works twelve to fourteen hours per day (*P*, 146; 150). If fulfilling sexual relationships have become next to impossible in the west, then, it is partly because no one has any *time*. *Plateforme* may recognise global corporate capitalism as the natural milieu in which its narrative evolves, and it may display apparently genuine wonder for some of capitalism’s success stories, but ultimately the novel leans towards critique. It is not enough to succeed in business, as Valérie tells Michel, because the pressure to innovate, grow and improve is unrelenting: ‘c’est le principe du capitalisme: si tu n’avances pas, tu es mort’ (*P*, 189; 195).¹⁰ The characters are trapped in this system, not only by their economic dependency, but because the insane cadence of their working life forestalls any attempt to think through an alternative. As Valérie says, ‘je ne vois pas comment y échapper. Il faudrait, une fois, qu’on prenne le temps de réfléchir; mais je ne sais pas quand on pourra prendre le temps de réfléchir’ (*P*, 158; 163).¹¹ The only conceivable solution to this impasse is provided by the ultimate dream of capitalism: to make

so much money that one can withdraw from active life altogether. This is the future that Michel and Valérie begin to envisage at the end of *Plateforme*: having achieved unparalleled success with their chain of sex tourism resorts, they consider retiring to Thailand on the proceeds, breaking out of the infernal cycle of capitalism where one is encouraged to work harder in order to consume more, which in turn encourages more production necessitating more consumption and thus harder work. Or, as Valérie succinctly puts it, ‘La seule chose que puisse t’offrir le monde occidental, c’est des *produits de marque*’ (P, 317; 328).¹²

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

capitalism per se. Indeed, in *Ennemis publics* (2008), Houellebecq writes disarmingly of his nostalgia for the 'Trente Glorieuses', the thirty years of growth, prosperity and optimism that France enjoyed in the decades following the Second World War. The energy and *joie de vivre* of these years, Houellebecq suggests, now seem more impossibly distant than even the 1930s or the 1890s and, when looking at pictures from these years, 'je comprends que ce n'est pas seulement moi qui suis *dépressionniste*, c'est l'époque entière qui l'est' (EP, 67; 63).¹⁷

Significantly, though, in *Plateforme*, the proposed solution to the social and sexual quagmire in which the west is stuck comes from capitalism itself. In *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d'une île* (2005), Houellebecq's response to socio-sexual misery is to imagine a future community in which, although it may not be explicitly stated as such, a market economy presumably has little or no place. In *Plateforme*, on the contrary, a more short-term solution is found within the eminently capitalist domain of tourism. In a pioneering study, Dean MacCannell argued that the rise of mass tourism coincides with a transition to a post-industrial economy in which 'occupations' no longer provide the basis for social status, social action and social relationships and are instead replaced by 'lifestyle'. In this post-industrial context, work is pushed to 'the negative margins of existence' and is replaced by the conviction that 'life itself is supposed to be fun'.¹⁸ This is the world described by Houellebecq, in which the injunction to enjoy ourselves (which, like the injunction to make money, proves in practice to be much less egalitarian than it may sound, since the conditions of access to enjoyment are inequitably divided) coincides with the total collapse of productive labour. As Michel muses in *Plateforme*, 'aucune personne que je connaisse, n'aurait été capable, en cas par exemple de blocus par une puissance étrangère, d'assurer un redémarrage de la production industrielle [...] Nous vivions dans un monde composé d'objets dont la fabrication, les conditions de possibilité, le mode d'être nous étaient absolument étrangers' (P, 217; 225).¹⁹ Michel is completely unable to understand Valérie's bikini (made of 80 per cent latex and 20 per cent polyurethane) so instead slips a finger inside to caress her nipple. The order of the narration here serves as a demonstration of Houellebecq's point: since we are irredeemably alienated from thinking a latex bikini as a product of labour, all we can do is appreciate its superficial texture and use it for the purpose for which it was designed: a symbolic prop promoting an eroticised culture of fun. Where work is to be found at all in this culture, suggests MacCannell, it exists as an object of *sightseeing*,

located in museums and heritage centres, or alternatively found in other, less developed cultures which can be consumed through tourism. If westerners are still able to appreciate the dignity and universality of labour, argues MacCannell, it is not through their own work, from which they are thoroughly alienated, but instead ‘as it is revealed to them at their leisure through the displayed work of others’.²⁰ (This notion of work as something that we no longer know how to relate to in the west – at least not in a healthy manner – will be discussed further in relation to *La Carte et le territoire* below.)

Tourism

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

then, offers those with money a chance to reconnoitre their probable retirement home, while providing an elusive dream of alternative lifestyles for those without the capital to realise their definitive relocation. In purveying this fantasy of another life, the tourist industry lays bare the latent ambition of all consumer capitalism: the quantification of happiness. As Houellebecq remarks, there is sometimes even a helpful star-rating system, ‘pour indiquer l’intensité du bonheur qu’on [est] en droit d’espérer’ (‘which indicate[s] the intensity of the pleasure one [is] entitled to hope for’ (*P*, 20; 14)).

What kind of tourism does Houellebecq describe? As Aedín Ní Loingsigh has pointed out,²² the originality of *Plateforme*, when compared to the well-established genre of travel writing, is to offer not an independent discovery of the ‘real’ Thailand but instead that most vilified product of mass tourism: the package tour. At the beginning of the novel, Michel is honest about his ambitions: he does not exactly want to travel so much as *engage in tourism*. ‘Mes rêves,’ he admits, ‘sont médiocres’ (‘My dreams are run-of-the-mill’ (*P*, 31; 27)). As Maud Granger Remy notes,²³ travel, in *Plateforme*, is a consumer product like any other; the exotic, just like sex, is shown to have a precise monetary value. In keeping with the mixture of genres and registers described in Chapter 1 above, *Plateforme* often reads a little like a sales brochure. Both here and in *Lanzarote*, Houellebecq describes holiday packages in considerable detail, citing not just their duration and price, but also the official title, catalogue reference number and choice excerpts from the promotional literature (*P*, 31–2; 28; *L*, 11; 5). Lengthy discussion is also provided of tourism companies, their history, size, market share and commercial strategy (*P*, 32–3, 148–9; 29–30, 151–3). And, as an obedient consumer, Michel is pleased to detail the brand names, price, provenance and specifications of his new tourist accessories, a backpack and video camera (*P*, 37–8; 34).

As part of his coverage of mass tourism, Houellebecq does not hesitate to employ stereotypes. Michel himself, considering the uneasy clash between his ‘bureaucratic’ face and his casual beachwear, realises that he himself has become a stereotype: ‘un fonctionnaire quadragénaire qui tentait de se déguiser en jeune pour la durée de ses vacances’ (*P*, 43; 39).²⁴ As elsewhere in Houellebecq, much sexual stereotyping inevitably takes place. Thus, two young single women on Michel’s package tour are immediately judged to be ‘bimbos’ (*P*, 39; 35); meanwhile, a middle-aged, middle-class couple ‘donnaient l’impression de n’avoir pas baisé depuis trente ans’ (‘looked like they hadn’t fucked for thirty years’ (*P*, 46; 41)).

The overall profile and behaviour of the group is just as predictable as that of the individuals, and some of the finest moments of observational comedy in *Plateforme* come in Houellebecq's almost ethnographically styled reportage on the herding instincts of package tourists. As the tour gets under way, Michel anticipates that the group will soon be divided between two tables at meal times: 'il était temps de choisir son camp' ('it was time to take sides' (P, 53; 49)). The first instinct is for all the couples to gravitate towards each other, 'comme dans toute situation d'urgence' (P, 66; 63).²⁵ Later, though, the tables divide along lines of class and education (P, 71–2; 67–8) with the group at the 'lower' table muttering darkly about the pretentious 'poseurs' across the room (P, 103; 103). This thoroughly predictable behaviour is, however, entirely in keeping with the reassuringly familiar nature of the package tour which is designed to provide a comfortable dose of the exotic, an expected degree of the unexpected. As Michel realises while ticking all the 'Good' boxes on his customer-satisfaction questionnaire, 'Mes vacances s'étaient déroulées de façon normale. Le circuit avait été *cool*, mais avec un parfum d'aventure; il correspondait à son descriptif' (P, 128; 130).²⁶ Aedín Ní Loingsigh points out that since Houellebecq's characters are deliberately rendered so predictable 'we are numbed like tourists into expecting the expected, and even the unexpected'.²⁷ Thus, when the dinner-table conversations become the occasion for controversial remarks about race, religion and sex tourism (as we will see below), the relative shock is minimised. But Dean MacCannell goes further in assessing the cultural role of package tourists' predictable responses: the expected reactions of awe and admiration before sacred sites and great monuments, combined with a sense of disgust or indignation at the spectacle of poverty and pollution witnessed on holiday serve a wider function of social cohesion: 'Together, the two provide a moral stability to the modern touristic consciousness that extends beyond immediate social relationships to the structure and organization of the total society'.²⁸

One of the clichés of the tourist imaginary so precisely satirised by Houellebecq is the assumed superiority of 'authentic' culture where the authentic is opposed to the touristic, and to the tourist's own culture (as MacCannell notes, 'for moderns, reality and authenticity are thought to be elsewhere'²⁹). As a result, MacCannell specifies further, 'Tourists dislike tourists',³⁰ considering them(selves) to be representatives of the inauthentic. Josiane, one of the members of Michel's package tour, is a good example of the tourist's displaced self-loathing: 'Ce qu'elle pensait des touristes français qui ne pouvaient pas voyager

sans leur pinard, il ne fallait pas le lui demander' (P, 73; 70).³¹ A similar attitude is displayed by the quintessentially French guidebook, the *Guide du Routard*. The *Routard* is contemptuous of the very tourists who constitute its customer base and readership, written by 'des grincheux, dont l'unique objectif était de gâcher jusqu'à la dernière petite joie des touristes, qu'ils haïssaient' (P, 54; 51).³² Guide books like this of course favour 'authentic' destinations that are somewhat off the beaten track, but as such their stance is hypocritical since, as David Sweet notes, 'they set in motion the very processes that popularize and over-develop the alternative destinations they advertise'.³³ Michel eventually tosses his *Guide du Routard* in the bin. Tourist discourse, then, is divided into what MacCannell calls front and back regions: on the one hand, sites set up specifically to cater to tourists; on the other, 'authentic' locations consistent with the lived reality of the indigenous population. But, says MacCannell, 'It is always possible that what is taken to be entry into a back region is really entry into a front region that has been totally set up in advance for touristic visitation'.³⁴ This is what happens when Michel's tour arrives at a 'primitive' jungle resort, which appears to offer a taste of unspoilt Thailand, but has in fact been created by an expatriate Frenchman and serves traditional gallic cuisine. Houellebecq's ironic narration takes particular delight in the fact that a couple of tourists who are invariably described as 'les écologistes jurassiens' ('the ecologists from the Jura') spend a sleepless night tormented by mosquitoes in this eco-tourist paradise (P, 79–80; 76–7).

The authentic, in other words, is unmasked in *Plateforme* as a desultory illusion sustained by tourists whose superior knowledge of the local culture is the ironic cover for their own, more fundamental naivety. Again it is an exchange with Josiane that underlines Houellebecq's point. Both she and Michel avoid the demonstration of traditional Thai dancing that accompanies a dinner on their tour, Michel because he is busy getting a 'full body massage', but Josiane because she finds it 'un peu trop touristique' ('a bit touristy'). Michel appears baffled by this comment: 'Qu'est-ce qu'elle voulait dire par là? Tout est touristique. Je me retiens une fois de plus de lui foutre mon poing sur la gueule' (P, 52; 48).³⁵ The comically excessive violence with which Michel greets Josiane's remark perhaps plays down the real importance of his judgement that 'Tout est touristique', which condenses the central thesis of *Plateforme*. What Houellebecq's novel shows, to quote Ní Loingsigh's gloss of this remark, is that 'the "base" commodity values of tourism have become integral to all areas of modern life'³⁶. If tourism is the

very model of capitalist activity, quantifying, packaging and selling the world itself as so many fun experiences, then the ‘hedonistic consumers’ that are tourists become, as Ryan Bishop and Lilian Robinson have argued, ‘universal cultural ambassadors, espousing as they do the value of the global marketplace and the globe-as-marketplace’.³⁷ Tourists are universal ambassadors because tourism has become – or at least provides the model for – a universal morality. Maud Granger Remy, following Christopher Lasch, has identified this ‘touristic approach to morality’, which consists of respecting other people, cultures and lifestyles, but, in its indiscriminating acceptance, has forgotten that respect is something to be *earned* rather than automatically accorded.³⁸ The culture of mass tourism has turned us all into *onlookers*. As MacCannell comments, tourism is symptomatic, but also generative, of a wider culture in which people are ‘permitted to view details of the inner operation of a commercial, domestic, industrial or public institution’:³⁹ one can go and view anything from a working farm or a nuclear power station to a parliament building and a royal palace. This culture of managed transparency has evident parallels with the increasingly visible sexuality that Houellebecq evoked in *Les Particules élémentaires*, which is why the touristic considerations of *Plateforme* provide a natural sequel. MacCannell himself, writing in the 1970s when the culture of ‘liberated’ sexuality and mass pornography first came to prominence, draws the same comparison: ‘Some political radicals and conservatives consider “swinging”, “massage therapy” and “wide-screen cunnilingus” to be indices of a general relaxation of society’s moral standards. These are, however, only special cases of reality displays, public orgasm worked up in the interest of social solidarity’.⁴⁰

Sex tourism

Given these parallels between the development of mass tourism and the rise of the sex industry as key markers of the culture of fun, it is understandable that the combination of the two in international sex tourism becomes the principal subject of *Plateforme*. Like sex, other cultures and peoples are more visibly present in our lives than ever before: sex tourism, then, constitutes a ‘natural’ combination of the two. Chris Ryan and Michael Hall have in fact argued that sex tourism could be seen as little more than a gradation or logical extension of tourism generally, since holidays, like so much else in consumer capitalism (cars, clothes, soft drinks), are sold through the illusory promise of sexual imagery: ‘it is the female body that is used to represent the pleasure of

the beach holiday'.⁴¹ Might we, then, extend the fundamental insight of Dean MacCannell? If the western tourist, thoroughly alienated from meaningful labour, seeks out work as a *sight to see* while on holiday, could the same become true of sex? If, as Houellebecq argues throughout his work, a happy, healthy sexuality has become virtually impossible in the west, is the next step for westerners to go and first observe it and subsequently purchase and practise it elsewhere? Thus, what MacCannell calls the generalised 'spuriousness' of western culture (read: sexuality) would find its idealised respondent in another society (and sexuality) fantasised as being more 'genuine'.⁴² Bishop and Robinson concur that a sexual subjectivity must be thoroughly alienated if it is to 'naturalize the purchase of sex on a regular basis and an entire international industry to support it'.⁴³ For Houellebecq, however, or at least for Houellebecq's narrator in *Plateforme*, sex tourism results from a simple, and inevitable, economic logic.⁴⁴ The passage in which this logic is laid out has doubtless become the most (in)famous of the entire novel:

d'un côté tu as plusieurs centaines de millions d'Occidentaux qui ont tout ce qu'ils veulent, sauf qu'ils n'arrivent plus à trouver de satisfaction sexuelle [...] De l'autre côté tu as plusieurs milliards d'individus [...] qui n'ont plus rien à vendre que leur corps, et leur sexualité intacte [...] c'est une situation d'échange idéale. Le fric qu'on peut ramasser là-dedans est presque inimaginable [...] il n'y a aucun secteur économique qui puisse y être comparé.⁴⁵ (*P*, 234; 242)

In *Plateforme*, this is presented as a win-win situation: a Thai sex worker can make in one night what an unskilled labourer in the same economy would make in a month (*P*, 107; 106–7); meanwhile, Valérie and Jean-Yves's tourism company, prepared to exploit this market openly with specifically targeted holiday resorts, is faced with a 50 per cent increase in profits (*P*, 258; 266). But, as Bishop and Robinson remark, in their impassioned and invaluable study of the Thai sex industry, such a view 'fosters a myth of worker and client reciprocity meeting each other's needs in an economic universe where capitalist relations are constructed as a part of nature'.⁴⁶

But, before we give serious consideration to criticisms of Houellebecq's idea, we must bear in mind that this vision of a generalised sex tourism takes its place alongside his other utopian solutions to our culture's sexual stalemate. The only difference – which perhaps explains the added controversy around *Plateforme* – is that this 'solution' could conceivably be put in place tomorrow, rather than in some distant, genetically

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

The implication, of course, is that if sex tourism partakes of an evolutionary logic then there is no point *objecting* to it, any more

than it is worth objecting to the extinction of the dodo, or the advent of the internet: these phenomena are the result of naturally occurring historical factors that are beyond any individual's control. If *Plateforme* created such scandal, then, it is partly because Houellebecq describes sex tourism without apparent judgement, simply as an economic reality. Houellebecq himself has suggested, surely somewhat disingenuously, that the focus of the press on the issue of sex tourism overlooks what is really shocking about *Plateforme's* diagnosis: the extinction of the conditions of possibility for love in the west which renders sex tourism a structural necessity (I2, 198). Inevitably, though, the novel's discussion of prostitution has given rise to criticism. David Leahy Sweet accuses Houellebecq of being complicit with the consumer culture's 'ethic of fun' that elsewhere he presumes to criticise.⁵¹ (In fact, however, Houellebecq seems to be satirising this culture, and in particular its degradation of the concept of rights, in the advertising slogan adopted by Eldorado Aphrodite, the chain of sex tourism-supporting resorts: 'parce qu'on a le droit de se faire plaisir' ['because pleasure is a right' (P, 248; 256)].) But the harshest criticism of *Plateforme* must be reserved for Houellebecq's unquestionably rose-tinted treatment of prostitution. All of the sex workers encountered in the novel, and especially in the scenes set in Thailand, are beautiful, attentive and talented, 'les meilleures amantes du monde' ('the best lovers in the world' (P, 77; 74)). Not only that but, in keeping with the utopian spirit of the enterprise, they all seem to be enjoying themselves, eager to fuck and sometimes reaching their own orgasms (P, 117; 118). AIDS, which, according to some estimates, could be responsible for as many as one-third of all deaths in Thailand,⁵² is largely absent from this picture, the narrator not hesitating to trust a prostitute who declares 'No problem, no condom ... I'm OK!' (P, 116; 117). In short, as Michel exclaims, 'C'était une bénédiction, ces petites putes thaïes' ('They were a godsend, these little Thai whores' (P, 303; 315)). And it is not just Thai prostitutes who are eager to provide the narrator's happiness: even indigenous locals not employed by the sex industry, such as a Cuban chambermaid, join in unquestioningly with the western couple's sexual congress at the mere tendering of a hand in invitation (P, 206; 212). Pierre Varrod's assessment of this material can stand for that of many other critics when he writes: 'le silence sur la prostitution forcée est assourdissant' ('the silence over enforced prostitution is deafening').⁵³

But is it really fair to judge *Plateforme* in these terms? Varrod protests that Houellebecq fails to show the extent to which prostitution

is 'forced'; but, we might respond, in Houellebecq's novelistic universe, *everything is forced*. Houellebecq has repeatedly implied, both in his novels and in interviews, that such reassuring notions as individual psychology and freedom of choice are fictions *created by and used to sustain the market economy*. Houellebecq subscribes to Auguste Comte's view that 'psychology' should be considered as little more than a branch of animal physiology (I2, 247–8). Meanwhile, the notion of 'free will' is essentially nothing but a self-congratulatory 'decoration' resulting from the fact that people are conscious of their desires but not conscious of the causes of those desires (EP, 175; 170). In Houellebecq's terms, then, it would be a truism to suggest that prostitution is 'forced' because, even when it is not *enforced* by threatened or actual violence, women are still pushed into the role by their economic circumstances, themselves largely an accident of birth. As Bishop and Robinson comment, in the vast majority of cases, prostitution is, at best, 'a forced choice'⁵⁴ or, in the words of Ryan and Hall, 'the least of numerous evils'.⁵⁵ In short, Houellebecq's novel implies the following conclusion: all prostitution is 'forced' to the extent that even those women who may choose sex work as a quick, efficient and relatively enjoyable way of making money⁵⁶ would doubtless not choose to sleep with all these men if they could easily make as much money doing something else; similarly, all men who pay for sex are 'forced' to do so to the extent that if they could gratify their sexual urges free of charge through the willing connivance of women, they would not consider paying a prostitute. Admittedly, as Bishop and Robinson protest, it is an 'oversimplification' to equate 'those who suffer from lonely privilege' with 'those who suffer from crushing poverty': 'One is seeking sexual succor; the other is seeking mere subsistence'.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, we might argue, ultimately, that Houellebecq's point is not so dissimilar from that of scholars such as Bishop and Robinson. In their different ways, both try to show that by focusing on the stereotype of the sordid and immoral sex tourist, or on 'the problem' of child prostitution, we overlook the broader structural-economic factors that make sex tourism possible, that is to say the economic disparities between the first world and the developing world and, within a country like Thailand, between the urban, touristic economy and the rural, agricultural economy. In the absence of a more radical solution to these inequities, both Houellebecq and most ethnographic observers of sex work are calling, first and foremost, for a normalisation and regularisation of the market and of working practices. Houellebecq's vision of a chain of resorts called Eldorado

Aphrodite aims at precisely that, albeit couched in rather more flippant and self-serving terms.

But, of course, it is precisely these terms that are the problem. A charitable (though doubtless rather naive) reading of *Plateforme* might suggest that it presents a realistic, if imperfect, solution to real social and economic problems. But this would be to overlook the fact that the very idea of a mass regulated sex tourism revives a colonialist relationship between the west and the developing world. This relationship is necessarily hypocritical since, in seeking solace from the failure of western sexuality amid the 'unspoiled' sexuality of developing nations, the sex tourist is all the time importing his own bankrupt values into the local culture.⁵⁸ Needless to say, there is nothing 'natural' about the submissiveness of Thai women which, leaving aside domestic cultural traditions, is partly the result of the exertion, in the recent past, of the west's economic and military power. Pattaya, the beach resort where Houellebecq's novel closes, was originally set up based on a contractual agreement by the Thai government to provide 'rest and recreation' facilities to American GIs during the Vietnam War.⁵⁹ When, in the 1970s, Thailand sought to develop its tourist economy following encouragement from the World Bank, the brothels set up to cater for US troops could easily be turned into hostess bars serving the unaccompanied business travellers who represented the first wave of international visitors to the kingdom.⁶⁰ Thus, as Bishop and Robinson put it, 'corporate entertainment contracts [...] effectively replaced military ones',⁶¹ and Thailand's reputation as the world's pre-eminent destination for sex tourism was established. 'Without a large set of clients,' insist Bishop and Robinson, 'the international sex industry could not flourish'.⁶² The terms of the encounter are always set, in the last instance, by the westerner, who wields the economic power. As Michel notes in *Plateforme*, 'le prix de base, c'est à peu près toujours le même: celui que les Occidentaux sont prêts à payer' (*P*, 207; 214).⁶³ Michel is no doubt engaging in a form of knowing postmodern irony when he suggests that the Eldorado Aphrodite resorts might borrow a line from Baudelaire to use in their marketing: 'Et des esclaves nus tout imprégnés d'odeurs...' (*P*, 246; 254).⁶⁴ In places, nonetheless, the Thai sex industry is disturbingly reminiscent of the slave trade, the girls lined up to be selected for purchase by white men, who identify the one they want thanks to a number pinned to her chest (*P*, 113; 114). The attitude Michel takes towards his chosen bar girl is typical of the paternalistic coloniser – 'Je passai une main sous sa jupe et lui caressait les fesses, comme pour

la protéger' (*P*, 114; 115)⁶⁵ – whereas the indigenous women appear, to borrow Bishop and Robinson's analysis, 'simultaneously childlike and erotic', according to 'tropes that have been part of colonial discourse for centuries'.⁶⁶ Furthermore, the kind of tourism envisaged under the name Eldorado Aphrodite – self-contained resorts run by a western-based multinational company but tolerating, and indeed encouraging, local prostitutes to operate within their grounds – differs little from what Dean MacCannell, citing the work of Ruth Young, calls 'plantation tourism'. Frequently found in 'societies with rigid, dualized class systems and already exploited peasant masses', this kind of set-up can be regarded as doubly exploitative in that 'the tourist gets little for his money', and the westerner's money does nothing to boost the wider economy, in this case serving only to sustain the demand for a steady supply of prostitutes.⁶⁷ It would perhaps be wrong to overstate the similarities between the traditional colonial relationship and that envisaged by Houellebecq in *Plateforme* – after all, the economic and geopolitical contexts are very different today than they were two or three centuries ago. All the same, it must be regarded as a *neo-colonialist* attitude if western males seek compensation for what is, arguably today, the declining influence of white European culture through the exertion of power over the bodies of women in the developing world. Or, as Robert, a self-confessed racist on Michel's package tour puts it, 'Le véritable enjeu de la lutte raciale [...] c'est la compétition pour le vagin des jeunes femmes' (*P*, 114; 114).⁶⁸

'Race'⁶⁹

Part of the controversy around *Plateforme*, then, evidently stems from Houellebecq's apparent insensitivity to issues of race and ethnicity. There are, I suggest, three strands to the 'ethnic' controversy of *Plateforme* that need to be disentangled. These are effectively three separate issues, linked only by the very broad overall sense of a social malaise that permeates all of Houellebecq's writing; each represents a 'problem' that is, to all intents and purposes, largely unrelated to the others. It is their proximity in the text, however, that creates an impression of cross-influence and can lead to hasty accusations – for instance, to Houellebecq being branded 'racist'. The first 'issue' is that of sex tourism, with its inevitable neocolonialist implications, discussed above. The second is the question of 'ethnic' violence in France, in particular located in the deprived *banlieues* and associated with young men of immigrant heritage. The headquarters of Valérie's company, *Aurore*, are located in the Parisian suburb of Evry, an area with the highest crime

rate in France and site of frequent violent clashes between police and disenfranchised local youths. The Aurore offices are situated in a secure compound and employees are discouraged from using public transport. When one young woman makes the mistake of catching the train home late at night, she is brutally gang raped (P, 191–2; 197). The third ethnic controversy in *Plateforme* is the anti-islamic discourse voiced in the novel. As the narration progresses, this discourse becomes generalised and is spread among various characters (as we will see below) but, initially at least, the hatred of Islam is closely focalised on Michel. The novel opens with Michel's discovery that his father has been murdered by a Muslim, the brother of the maid with whom Michel's father was having an affair. Despite his lack of filial affection, Michel feels considerable anger towards the killer: 'Si j'avais disposé d'une arme, je l'aurais abattu sans hésitation' (P, 25; 20).⁷⁰ Later, when Islamic terrorists bomb one of the Eldorado Aphrodite resorts, robbing Michel of both Valérie and his sexual Utopia in one fell swoop, his hatred of Muslims is confirmed: 'L'islam avait brisé ma vie, et l'islam était certainement quelque chose que je pouvais haïr' (P, 338; 349).⁷¹ I would stress, again, that we should be careful not to overestimate the connection between these three narrative strands. Martin Ryle has suggested that the novel invites us to see the deprivation experienced in the French *banlieues* as part of a continuum that also includes the exploitation of Thai prostitutes: both are 'part of that same system of inequality, against which brutal violence is a predictable protest'.⁷² But this seems to me too generous a reading of *Plateforme*: Houellebecq is no Marxist and his novel is not some attempt to identify an oppressed class consciousness existing on a global scale (if only because, as we have argued above, he shows little awareness of how Thai prostitutes are exploited). But nor is the novel some kind of reactionary call for a neocolonialism as a way of restoring order over the unruly 'others' who are destroying our civilisation. Houellebecq observes and recounts these different social phenomena, but the relations between them are largely circumstantial. Michel indulges in sex tourism, not out of a conscious desire to subjugate women of colour, but because he cannot get laid at home, which is seen to be a result of the troubled legacy of 'sexual liberation'; this, in turn, has little or nothing to do with immigration into France, but was essentially an invention of the white middle class, as was amply demonstrated in *Les Particules élémentaires*. The murder of Michel's father by a Muslim is a private, family affair and not really related to the civil unrest in the *banlieues*, where Muslims are not mentioned. The gang rapists are 'de type antillais' ('West Indian'

(*P*, 191; 197)), which carries no presumption of Muslim identity. Yes, Muslim terrorists are responsible for the destruction of the Eldorado Aphrodite resort, but this hardly strains the novel's verisimilitude and, besides, Houellebecq is keen to point out that some Arab men are also clients of the sex industry in Thailand (*P*, 298, 337–8; 309, 349).

Nonetheless, it was the criticism of Islam that caused most trouble for Houellebecq following the publication of *Plateforme*. Had the expression of Islamophobia been restricted to Michel, who has a personal axe to grind, the violence of the sentiments might have been understandable. But Houellebecq has similar ideas voiced by other characters, including several Muslims themselves. This comes across as a rather cheap trick since, as Aedín Ní Loingsigh comments, these characters 'are clearly meant to be seen as unimpeachable witnesses whose insiders' criticism of their own religion and culture are intended to validate Michel's prejudices'.⁷³ For the reader, however, it is practically impossible to hear any difference at all between the distinctive, sardonic tone of Michel's narratorial voice, and that employed by these Muslim characters. Thus, Aïcha, the ex-lover of Michel's father, says of her brothers: 'ils s'entretiennent mutuellement dans leur connerie, ils se bourrent la gueule au pastis tout en se prétendant les dépositaires de la vraie foi' (*P*, 27; 22).⁷⁴ An Egyptian that Michel met on an earlier holiday told him that: 'L'islam ne pouvait naître que dans un désert stupide, au milieu de Bédouins crasseux qui n'avaient rien d'autre à faire [...] que d'enculer leurs chameaux' (*P*, 243–4; 251).⁷⁵ Finally, a Jordanian banker tells him that Islam has no future because 'le paradis promis par le prophète exist[e] déjà ici-bas [...] il suffit d'avoir une antenne parabolique' (*P*, 338–9; 350).⁷⁶ Given that France now has the largest Muslim population of any country in Europe, estimated at somewhere between four and six million,⁷⁷ it is perhaps not surprising that remarks like this, from so popular and prominent a writer as Houellebecq, caused consternation. A court case was mounted against Houellebecq by a group comprised of France's Islamic League, the International Islamic League, the Grand Mosque of Lyons and the French League of Human Rights. He was tried for, and eventually acquitted of, incitement to religious hatred and making religious insults.⁷⁸ With characteristic disingenuousness, Houellebecq has feigned surprise at the reaction provoked by the anti-islamic comments in *Plateforme*, claiming that he thought he was 'stating the obvious' and expressing his concern that 'Le respect est devenu obligatoire, y compris pour les cultures les plus immorales et les plus sottes' (*I2*, 193).⁷⁹ Houellebecq has also tried to stipulate that his

problem is with Islam as a religion rather than with Arabs as people but, again, it is naive to think that the two can be neatly compartmentalised in a country like France. As Martin Ryle argues: ‘Colonial history, which brought so many Arabs and Muslims to live in France, overdetermines the meaning of every sign of Islamic identity there today, and means that the abstract truth that religion is distinct from “race” is concretely a half-truth at best’.⁸⁰ Besides, it is difficult to lend any credence to Houellebecq’s supposed respect for Arabs when his novel includes such puerile ‘jokes’ as the reference to the ‘tea-towel’ by which they can be identified (*P*, 108; 108).

Plateforme, and also Houellebecq’s other tourist narrative *Lanzarote*, are full of these kinds of national and racial stereotypes. If we were to be charitable, we might, again, put this down to Houellebecq’s dismissal of individual psychology: an acceptance that, for all practical purposes, people socialised in the same culture really are broadly alike. All the same, the stereotypes employed in these books are among the most facile and unthinking aspects of Houellebecq’s comic writing and are frequently offensive. Thus, the Japanese are ‘weird’ (*P*, 51; 47), all the men have strange sexual kinks, doubtless as a result of their ‘méchanceté naturelle’ (‘innate viciousness’ (*P*, 63; 60)). The Chinese, meanwhile, are dirty, behaving, in everything they do, like pigs (*P*, 104–5; 104). They are also inscrutable: ‘On peut vivre parmi les Chinois pendant des années sans jamais rien comprendre à leur mode de vie’ (*P*, 261; 269).⁸¹ Europeans are perhaps more harmless but just as predictable. Germans are always the first to reserve beach chairs with their towels (*L*, 23; 23) and their senior citizens like to get together and sing drinking songs (*P*, 106; 105). Italian men are all lotharios (*P*, 265; 274) but Italian women are so convinced of their own beauty they become ‘imbaisables’ (‘unfuckable’ (*L*, 45–6; 56)); as such, they compare poorly with Spanish women, who enjoy sex and often have large breasts (*L*, 45; 55–6). One rarely encounters the English on holiday, however, since they will only visit places favoured by other English tourists: they have no interest at all in discovering other cultures (*L*, 16; 13). Finally, particular scorn is reserved for less populous European nations. The only reason Norwegians exist, it seems, is to ‘accréditer cette légende selon laquelle on aurait vu des gens se baigner en janvier’ (*L*, 15; 12).⁸² Belgium is ‘un pays déliquescant et absurde, un pays qui n’aurait jamais dû exister’ (*L*, 30; 33).⁸³ As for Luxembourg, it is ‘même pas un pays, en fait, plutôt un ensemble de bureaux fantômes dispersés dans des parcs, de simples boîtes postales pour les sociétés en quête d’évasion fiscale’ (*L*, 29; 32).⁸⁴

As with his portraits of tourists on holiday, however, critics have suggested that Houellebecq is acting very knowingly in his use of national caricatures and stereotypes. As we saw above, Aedin Ní Loingsigh sees predictability as being absolutely central to *Plateforme*, in such a way that Michel's offensive remarks and attitudes become 'almost reliably *outré*'.⁸⁵ Christian Monnin argues that there is an obvious 'burlesque' dimension to the sweeping generalisations in *Lanzarote*, and he compares Houellebecq to the French humorist Pierre Desproges for 'le ton péremptoire qu'il emploie volontiers pour lancer les affirmations les plus farfelues'.⁸⁶ But Ní Loingsigh has suggested that this situation is complicated by the fact that Houellebecq's text is 'almost entirely devoid of irony'.⁸⁷ What this means is that Houellebecq's narrator is in fact just as predictable (in his behaviour and his pronouncements) as all the people he discusses. Michel, in *Plateforme*, is not employing stereotypes ironically in order to suggest his own superiority over the stereotyped – instead, he is, himself, a stereotype, and it is his discourse that reveals him as such. In addition, as Martin Ryle remarks, 'No implied author can be located, aloof from the narration, guiding our responses'.⁸⁸ This has two consequences: it means that Michel is a complex, flawed character, but not one who is judged by an omniscient narrator – as such he attracts a degree of sympathy; but, secondly, the absence of a higher authorial voice means that Houellebecq himself cannot easily be exonerated from implication in the offensive attitudes that Michel displays. David Sweet suggests that Houellebecq's famous flatness of tone (already discussed in Chapter 1) plays a role here, since it 'conveys a sustained sense of non-conviction that screens both narrator and author from any easy attribution of blame'.⁸⁹ Not only that, but the sheer predictability of so many of these remarks begins to take on a suspicious quality: readers may begin to wonder if they are 'being lured into a trap designed to test the *predictability* of their responses rather than the ethical validity of their arguments'.⁹⁰ Marie Redonnet sees this as a typical tactic of postmodern fiction: to bait the reader with offensive material and then react to any critique with the slur of political correctness which, it is implied, is anti-literary in that it would seek to limit the freedom of expression.⁹¹ According to a powerful argument put forward by Ruth Cruickshank, Houellebecq is problematic – and indeed this may be the ultimate reason for all the controversy surrounding him – because commentators on his work find themselves in a no-win situation.⁹² In all of his work, Houellebecq is clear that the language he employs is by no means new but merely plucked from the ambient discourses circulating

in our society (hence the incorporation in his writing, discussed in Chapter 1, of everything from advertising copy, to sociological analysis, to pornography). In a sense, we are obliged to recognise that Houellebecq quotes the offensive stereotypes in *Plateforme* and *Lanzarote*, rather than making them up himself. But, if this is the case, then the media must recognise their own complicity in the discourses Houellebecq uses, and in the ideological crisis he describes. Simply to condemn the ideas put forward in Houellebecq's work is, on the one hand, dishonest – a failure to see how racism, sexism, blind consumerism, etc. continue to operate in the media or, for that matter, in higher education; but it is also, on the other hand, equally predictable and ineffectual because it partakes of political correctness, an ideology that has demonstrated itself to be quite incapable of resolving the current crisis (and, as such, must be considered complicit with, or partly responsible for it). To respond to Houellebecq with political correctness is inadequate, since political correctness can do nothing but maintain the status quo, which is itself inadequate. Where will political correctness get us, asks Houellebecq: 'On me promet juste de pouvoir continuer à me faire chier, de pouvoir acheter des polos Ralph Lauren...' (I2, 205).⁹³

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

notion of Houellebecq as ‘average’ is itself ideologically determined, that is to say the kind of socio-economic profile that can present itself as average (white, middle-class, educated, male, heterosexual) is the one with the power (economic, cultural and symbolic) to do so. Marc Weitzmann has commented that Houellebecq’s social documenting is precise and detailed, but only so long as he remains within the confines of his familiar sphere, that of the French middle classes.⁹⁷ I would go further and suggest that this narrow perspective is not only middle-class but also metropolitan and childless. In *Plateforme*, the true limits of Michel’s world view are revealed when he proves totally unable to imagine who could be responsible for the global success of sportswear brands like Nike and Adidas: ‘il devait y avoir des secteurs entiers de la société qui me demeureraient étrangers’ (*P*, 263; 272).⁹⁸ This suggests not only that Michel has never been inside a gym, but also, and more improbably, that he has never come within sight of a schoolyard in a provincial town anywhere in the western world. In fairness, however, Houellebecq has defended his right to speak from a personal point of view in his writing. Contemporary French literature is commonly accused of ‘navel-gazing’, but Houellebecq expresses his impatience with this view, suggesting that to pretend to speak of, or for, wider humanity without first speaking of oneself would be dishonest. ‘Il est bien plus facile qu’on ne l’imagine d’atteindre l’universel en parlant de soi’, says Houellebecq (*I2*, 212),⁹⁹ if only because, to rehearse a now familiar argument, people are less different than we would like to believe.

But the situation is more complicated still. On the one hand, Houellebecq is to be regarded as ‘average’ and represents a position of relative wealth, privilege and status in French society. Yet, on the other hand, he – or at least his narrator – is so cut off from the life of French society that we are invited to believe he does not know a single person who owns a pair of trainers! In other words, Houellebecq is both at the centre of French society and on the margins (and this is reflected in his position as a writer: the best-selling and most talked about French author of recent years, yet living in exile in Ireland). John McCann suggests that there are two quite distinct visions of France in *Plateforme*. First, there is a France that is well integrated, successful and harmonious – this is the France of Michel’s favourite game show, *Questions pour un champion*, which gives the general impression that ‘les gens sont heureux’ (‘people are happy’ (*P*, 13; 8)). Coexisting alongside this France, however, is a France in crisis, where social cohesion has failed and society is close to chaos – the France, let us say, where women are gang

raped on the RER.¹⁰⁰ Houellebecq, it seems, lives in both versions of France at once (that is, to the extent that he lives in France at all; but we must surely accept that even if he is resident, for tax purposes, in Ireland, Houellebecq continues to spend a lot of time in France). The uncertainty is further reflected in Houellebecq's ambivalent attitude towards state authorities like the police. In *Ennemis publics*, he expresses his horror of bullying and mob violence and counts himself lucky that he lives in a 'reasonably well-policed state' and so has not had to face vigilante reprisals following his controversial publications (*EP*, 16–17; 12). This bespeaks a confidence, proper to the ruling class, that the police are there for his protection rather than to persecute him. Yet, some seventy pages later, he complains about the excessive policing of the state and expresses his sense, as a smoker, of being harrassed and excluded from society: public space, he laments, has become 'un territoire hostile, zébré d'interdictions absurdes et humiliantes [...] un territoire de toute façon où je ne suis absolument pas le bienvenu, où je n'ai pas ma place, où rien d'intéressant ni d'agréable ne peut m'arriver' (*EP*, 86; 82).¹⁰¹ There is, I would argue, no 'solution' to this awkward problem of Houellebecq's cultural positioning, and indeed we might suggest that it is partly responsible for his popularity: his ability to cast himself as a victim while still speaking from a position of relative power undoubtedly speaks to an embattled sense of cultural authority among the educated middle classes in France, who have seen their naturalised sense of security and entitlement come under threat from the social unrest on the margins of French society, from the declining global influence of their national culture, and from the unpredictable push-and-pull of an unrestrained global marketplace. The position of Houellebecq and his protagonists is shared by his readers: suspicious of a state and a bourgeois culture for which they have been taught to nurture a healthy contempt, yet feeling nervous, unprotected and alone faced with a global culture whose unregulated market forces have the power to determine the shape of their lives.

La Carte et le territoire

France and the World

The tense and evolving relationship between France and the world is also central to *La Carte et le territoire*. In this novel, a young visual artist, Jed Martin, finds success with a series of paintings depicting

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

The France of *La Carte et le territoire* bears some similarity to that of *Plateforme*. The country is marked by social tensions: Jed's wealthy father lives in a large house in the Parisian suburb of Le Raincy that he bought several decades ago and that has since been surrounded by underprivileged housing estates controlled by gangs; Jed cannot find a taxi firm willing him to take him all the way there (*CT*, 17; 6). His father, grown infirm, relies on the help of a Senegalese carer supplied by the local council, yet relations between them are strained and mistrustful, the helper doing the bare minimum of work around the house (*CT*, 18; 6). Meanwhile, in Paris itself, Jed finds a group of homeless men squatting in the courtyard of his building during the Christmas holidays (*CT*, 26–7; 11). These signs of a fractured society are accompanied by indications of economic decline. The property market has collapsed, with prices in free fall and buildings standing empty for want of buyers (*CT*, 44; 24). The trend for foreigners to invest in second homes in the French countryside also appears to be over, the market among the British having dried up following the financial crisis of the late 2000s (*CT*, 57–8; 33–4). Traditional markers of French social life such as the proletarian café are close to extinction, having been gradually killed off by changing lifestyles and definitively brought to an end by the ban on smoking in public places (*CT*, 109; 69–70). If we are to believe *La Carte et le territoire*, the high points of French culture today are

incarnated by the likes of Julien Lepers, presenter of the television game show *Questions pour un champion* (CT, 50; 28), or Pierre Bellemare, ‘roi français du téléachat’ (‘the French king of teleshopping’ (CT, 232; 157)). Michel Houellebecq’s novels have always combined a truly global reach (hence his worldwide success) with a curiously parochial focus on personalities, behaviours and concerns that mean little outside France. This contrast is brought into particularly sharp relief in *La Carte et le territoire* which mentions several minor celebrities from the French media and is partly concerned with the current and future state of the so-called ‘France profonde’, the country’s rural heartland. The novel displays somewhat ambivalent sentiments towards this traditional, provincial France. On the one hand, we find comically unequivocal statements like this one:

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

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

At the same time as looking inward to ‘la France profonde’, however, *La Carte et le territoire* is also aware that France is, more than ever, dependent on business and trade with other nations if its economy is to survive. Jed’s father did not make his money in France but by constructing holiday resorts in Portugal, the Maldives and the Caribbean (CT, 35; 18). Throughout *La Carte et le territoire*, there are indications that the economy and culture of France, and more generally of western nations, are being eclipsed by the rise of Asian powers. It is significant that when Jed paints a portrait of contemporary artists Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst he sets it against a middle-eastern background, drawn

from the publicity images of a hotel in Abu Dhabi (*CT*, 9; 1), as though to imply the influence exerted over the art market by finance originating in the oil of the Persian Gulf. Elsewhere, the decisive influence of the Indian and Chinese economies is felt over the future cultural life of France. Jed's portrait of Michel Houellebecq will eventually be sold to an Indian mobile phone mogul (*CT*, 394; 278). It is notable too that when the omniscient narration – seemingly enunciated from a perspective at least fifty years in the future – evokes commentators on Jed Martin's work the most significant of them are Chinese, one Wong Fu Xin in particular (*CT*, 117, 180; 75, 120). The western hegemony over cultural discourse is just another thing we will have to learn to live without, implies Houellebecq, even as countries like France seek to adapt their hospitality industry to cater to a majority of Chinese tourists.

Because, where *Plateforme* analysed the motivations and manoeuvres of French citizens travelling to distant corners of the globe in search of touristic satisfaction, *La Carte et le territoire* reflects on France itself as a tourist destination. After decades, indeed centuries, of rural exodus in France, Houellebecq's new novel predicts the imminent rediscovery of the French countryside: 'pour la première fois en réalité en France depuis Jean-Jacques Rousseau, la campagne était redevenue *tendance*' (*CT*, 87; 54).¹⁰⁴ Houellebecq identifies important precursors to this movement, such as the television presenter Jean-Pierre Pernaut who shrewdly steered the afternoon news broadcast away from distressing international stories and towards reassuring reportages about the character, landscape and traditional practices of France's regions (*CT*, 227; 153–4). A similar nostalgia for 'la France profonde' may have been exploited, suggests Houellebecq, by the campaign slogan 'La force tranquille', which ensured François Mitterrand's re-election in 1988, doubtless largely through its appeal to the heartland (*CT*, 227; 154). The traditional France of the regions, if it has largely disappeared from the daily life of their inhabitants, is now exploited by the high-end hospitality industry with its foregrounding of products from the French *terroir*. Thus, 'Chez Anthony et Georges', an exclusive Parisian restaurant run by a metropolitan gay couple, sources all of its furniture and tableware in antique stores and proudly vaunts its crayfish freshly delivered from the Limousin, or its vintage 1905 armagnac (*CT*, 64–5, 83; 38, 51). Similarly, the chain of luxury hotels in the provinces, dubbed 'French Touch', overseen by Jed's sometime girlfriend Olga, offers a seductive combination of traditional French pleasures and pursuits together with the highest standards of comfort for hedonistic guests (*CT*, 98–9; 62–3).

Experience shows that the most popular dishes in these establishments are those drawing on traditional local cuisine, such as cheese and pork products, but especially unusual animals like wood pigeon, snails or lamprey: what the guests at these hotels seek is ‘une expérience gastronomique *vintage*, voire *hardcore*’ (CT, 95; 60).¹⁰⁵ It is perhaps not necessary to add that the customers for such an experience are not French (and certainly not the traditional French peasant class who might once have hunted wood pigeon or collected snails for their own sustenance); the French, we are told, can no longer really afford to holiday in France, and the tourism industry is instead dedicated to incoming Chinese, Indians and Russians (CT, 66; 39). With its manufacturing industry long dead, the economy of France’s near future relies, in Houellebecq’s prediction, upon the maintenance of a loosely defined *art de vivre* that can be sold to representatives of emerging economies in the form of potted meats and four-star hotel breaks. The appearance of traditional French villages is scrupulously maintained – ‘ici, on ne plaisantait pas avec le patrimoine’ (CT, 246; 167)¹⁰⁶ – but no one really *lives* in them: the village to which the fictional Houellebecq retires in the Loiret in central France gives the impression of ‘un village faux, reconstitué pour les besoins d’une série télévisée’ (‘a fake village recreated for a television series’ (CT, 270; 185)). The tourist France described in *La Carte et le territoire* comes across, above all, as *hyperreal* – a term first popularised in the late 1970s by Umberto Eco, writing about American culture. In hyperreality, as Eco describes it, it is more important that a place, an object or an experience should *seem* real than that it should actually *be* real. Or, more to the point, such a distinction effectively disappears because looking or seeming real is equated with being real.¹⁰⁷ Why travel to Europe to see the paintings of old masters when you can see an exact replica in California? Similarly, why worry about the disappearance of traditional rural culture in France when that culture is replicated in world-class hotels marketed at the wealthiest of populations? The very name ‘French Touch’ is representative of this shift: it implies that the experience on offer in these hotels is not simply French but has an extra *touch* of Frenchness; it is, in a sense, more French than French.

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

for instance in the hospitality industry or the media (developing its own travel-related television channel). Jed comes into contact with the company after realising a long series of art works based around close-up photography of details from Michelin road maps. He meets Olga, who has emigrated from Russia and is overseeing many of the company's new ventures, including the project to open a space devoted to contemporary art in Paris. From being a family company based in the Auvergne with a stake in traditional French culture, especially cuisine, Michelin has thus become a multinational concern with a diverse portfolio of interests. Michelin's enthusiastic participation in the culture of a hyperreal France is demonstrated when Jed attends the launch party for Michelin TV, where he is greeted by fanfares played on traditional Breton bagpipes and served gewurtztraminer by waitresses in 'typical' Alsatian dress (CT, 231; 156). Jed's work with Michelin maps becomes, in Houellebecq's novel, an important metaphorical (or metonymic) representation of this replacement of France by its hyperreal double. As mentioned above, Jed's photographs emphasise details of Michelin's maps – notably those of rural areas – by composing in depth and from unexpected angles. The resulting exhibition is entitled 'La carte est plus intéressante que le territoire' ('The map is more interesting than the territory' (CT, 80; 48)), and demonstrates its point by juxtaposing Jed's compositions with satellite photos of the same parts of the country: where the satellite images show blandly uniform patches of green and blue, the maps are full of picturesque features and intriguing detail, coming across, in sum, as 'un territoire de rêve, féérique et inviolable' ('a dream territory, fairy-like and inviolable' (CT, 63; 37)). The France of Jed's photographs is a hyperreal one, more interesting – because more 'real', more detailed and precise – than the real one. In any case, as Houellebecq points out in the novel, topography is unstable, and as much a function of economics and geopolitics as it is of geology and tectonics. At Ireland's Shannon airport, Jed notices the large number of low-cost flights departing to cities in Poland and the Canary Islands, the former serving Ireland's large community of Polish immigrants, the latter catering to Irish tourists on cheap package holidays. This example demonstrates how a kind of virtual world can be overlaid on the physical one according to the rules of economic supply and demand. As Houellebecq puts it, 'A la surface plane, isométrique de la carte du monde se substituait une topographie anormale où Shannon était plus proche de Katowice que de Bruxelles, de Fuerteventura que de Madrid' (CT, 148; 98).¹⁰⁸

Labour and art

If *La Carte et le territoire* questions the very possibility of identifying an ‘authentic’ France today, it raises a similar query about the nature of work in the twenty-first century. Jed is an artist who makes his name through portraits of different artisans and professionals plying their trades and the status and evolution of work, together with the relations between art and other forms of labour, become important themes in the novel. As in *Plateforme*, the overwhelming place that work occupies in people’s lives is acknowledged in *La Carte et le territoire*. Jed looks wistfully around himself while sat in an airport: ‘Pour ce qu’il avait pu en observer l’existence des hommes s’organisait autour du travail, qui occupait la plus grande partie de la vie’ (CT, 102–3; 65).¹⁰⁹ (We see here a return to the kind of distant, posthumanist narratorial perspective of a complete alien to human society that Houellebecq has used repeatedly in the past, especially in the science-fiction narratives of *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île*.) In our societies, it is their job that most completely defines the identity of adults more than their relationship status or family: ‘C’est sa place dans le processus de production, et pas son statut de reproducteur, qui définit avant tout l’homme occidental’ (CT, 154; 101).¹¹⁰ But, as we saw above in relation to *Plateforme*, despite its crucial importance to individuals’ identity, work has largely ceased to have much meaningful relation to the world around us. Few of us have any understanding of how to adapt or modify the physical world now that artisanal labour has largely disappeared. In *La Carte et le territoire*, such traditional trades have been relegated almost exclusively to the hospitality industry where that very tradition is recycled and rebranded as part of an establishment’s hyperreal appeal, as in the cuisine ‘à l’ancienne’ that Jed eats with his father in a restaurant called Chez Papa (CT, 19–20; 7).

The novel begins when Jed experiences problems with his water heater and searches desperately for a plumber who will come out during the Christmas vacation. Houellebecq fondly ironises the touching naivety of the names of small plumbing businesses: ‘*Simplement plombiers*’ (‘Simply Plumbers’) or ‘*Plomberie en général*’ (‘Plumbing in General’ (CT, 13; 3)). The plumber Jed eventually finds is not French at all but Croatian – a further indictment of the decline of useful trades in the west – and even he is seeking only to make some fast money before returning to his home country with the intention of hiring out jet skis to tourists. ‘Jed ressentit une déception humaine obscure à l’idée de cet homme abandonnant la plomberie, artisanat noble, pour louer des

engins bruyants et stupides à des petits péteux bourrés de fric habitant rue de la Faisanderie' (*CT*, 27–8; 12).¹¹¹ This notion of a 'noble trade', for which Houellebecq seems to be nostalgic at certain moments of *La Carte et le territoire*, is quite historically specific, as Dominique Méda has usefully pointed out in a book entitled *Le Travail: Une valeur en voie de disparition?* ('Work: An Endangered Value?').¹¹² The notion of the dignity of labour, Méda argues, belongs very much to the nineteenth century, having grown out of the philosophy of Hegel and, especially, Marx. In this humanist conception, work is a dialectical process whereby man transforms the world through his action upon it and, in the process, comes to know the full extent of his own capacities; full self-realisation, in other words, can only be achieved through work whose ultimate goal is nothing other than the transformation and perfection of man.¹¹³ It is this same conception of work that inspires the great socialist reformers of the nineteenth century such as Charles Fourier and William Morris, both of whom have a distinct, if discreet, presence in *La Carte et le territoire*. Jed's father has a large library of works devoted to nineteenth-century thinkers and regales his son on several occasions with the ideas of Fourier and Morris, as well as Alexis de Tocqueville. Their intrusion into the novel adds to the sense that Houellebecq is encouraging a reflection on the nature of work and its relationship to art. William Morris, in particular, was a staunch critic of the work–art dichotomy and, more generally, of the opposition between work and leisure, arguing that so long as people took no pleasure in their work no meaningful social change could be accomplished. Morris's utopian novel *News from Nowhere* (1890) imagines a moneyless, governmentless society based around gift exchange and in which people do the work that they want to and *because* they want to. In this society, all work is looked upon as a kind of art and, as one character remarks, 'it is this change which makes all the others possible'.¹¹⁴

What, then, does Houellebecq have to say about art in *La Carte et le territoire*? How, and why, is the labour of artistic creation different from other kinds of work? If the novel constitutes, at least in part, an enquiry into this problem, it does seem, at times, to uphold a rather traditional, romantic view of art. The most obvious distinction between art and other forms of work is that art is non-utilitarian. For instance, Jed compares his own work to that of his father, an architect, and hence also a creator of forms; the difference is that the forms that Jed creates are not ones in which anyone could *live* (*CT*, 37; 19). As Julian Stallabrass has remarked, the peculiar value of art relies precisely on its

uselessness: ‘Art appears to stand outside [the] realm of rigid instrumentality, bureaucratized life, and its complementary mass culture’.¹¹⁵ This distinction between utilitarian work and non-utilitarian art is mapped, to some extent in the novel, on to a division between photography and painting. Jed begins his artistic career as a photographer, creating two lengthy series of images of inanimate objects – first, metal tools and, second, the Michelin maps. But, when he turns to representing people with his series of ‘*Métiers*’, he feels the need to return to painting (CT, 139; 92). Somehow, with a model as subjective and hard to pin down as a human being, the unambiguous indexicality of a photograph seems inappropriate. The character Houellebecq confirms Jed’s intuition when he tells him (and this is before the portrait has even been painted): ‘j’ai été pris en photo des milliers de fois, mais s’il y a une image de moi, une seule, qui persistera dans les siècles à venir, ce sera votre tableau’ (CT, 173; 114).¹¹⁶ In places, too, *La Carte et le territoire* purveys a romantic notion of artistic inspiration. At one point, Jed is asked what it means to be an artist:

être artiste, à ses yeux, c’était avant tout être quelqu’un de *soumis*. Soumis à des messages mystérieux, imprévisibles, qu’on devait donc faute de mieux et en l’absence de toute croyance religieuse qualifier d’*intuitions*; messages qui n’en commandaient pas moins de manière impérieuse, catégorique, sans laisser la moindre possibilité de s’y soustraire – sauf à perdre toute notion d’intégrité et tout respect de soi-même.¹¹⁷ (CT, 104; 66)

The novel is also largely faithful to the notion that artists should have a distinct authorial signature which transcribes a unique world view. This is offered as the standard criterion of value in art history: ‘les grands peintres du passé étaient considérés comme tels lorsqu’ils avaient développé du monde une vision à la fois cohérente et innovante [...] Ils étaient encore davantage estimés en tant que peintres lorsque leur vision du monde paraissait exhaustive’ (CT, 36; 19).¹¹⁸ It is these same qualities that are used to consecrate Jed as an important artist: the exhibition catalogue that ‘Houellebecq’ writes stresses the ‘unity’ of Jed’s work, its ‘deep logic’ (CT, 183; 122). This is particularly reassuring to Franz, the gallery owner who exhibits Jed’s work, since he had warned that the media are often very unforgiving of artists who change direction (in this case, Jed’s switch from photography to painting) (CT, 154; 102).

At times, then, *La Carte et le territoire* appears thoroughly beholden to what Julian Stallabrass calls ‘those old notions of art’s ineffability,

touched more with mysticism than analysis', a conception of artistic creation that, arguably, constitutes little more than 'naked propaganda' for artists and their works.¹¹⁹ To uphold this traditional view of art as belonging to a unique and rarefied domain – some kind of pure economy of inspiration – is to ignore the extent to which art is bound up with other forms of work, business and monetary exchange. As Stallabrass comments: 'the economy of art closely reflects the economy of finance capital'.¹²⁰ He goes on:

Art prices and the volume of art sales tend to match the stock markets closely, and it is no accident that the world's major financial centres are also the principal centres for the sale of art. To raise this parallel is to see art not only as a zone of purposeless free play but as a minor speculative market in which art works are used for a variety of instrumental purposes, including investment, tax avoidance and money laundering.¹²¹

Stallabrass, then, opposes what we might call a posthumanist view of art to the romantic conception of the artist that grows out of humanism and that combines ideals of self-realisation with the myth of a spiritualised inspiration. But Houellebecq's novel is also clearly aware of this less romantic, more hard-headed side of the art world. Indeed, given his phenomenal success and the unprecedented publishing contracts he has enjoyed, it would be singularly disingenuous of the author to feign ignorance of the pecuniary motives so often driving the cultural sector. Jed himself is not unaware of the importance of *figures* in the art world. If he chooses to paint Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons as part of his '*Métiers*' series it is because they represent the first and second largest personal fortunes amassed through the sale of artworks. Jed himself, at least prior to his sudden, vertiginous promotion in the market with this series of paintings, had never risen above 583rd in the ranks of global art sales (*CT*, 29; 13). Unsure of his own value, Jed initially starts selling prints of his Michelin photographs at €200 each, only to revise the price up to €2,000 when he sees how quickly they sell out (*CT*, 91; 57). When the '*Métiers*' series is first exhibited the paintings are sold for €500,000 each and Jed is contacted by some of the wealthiest businessmen in the world seeking to commission portraits of themselves (*CT*, 200–1; 133–4). By the time the portrait of Michel Houellebecq is stolen its value is estimated at €12 million (*CT*, 381; 268). In this context, the idea that people make art out of some irresistible impulse, in response to mysterious voices, rings rather false. Indeed, Jed's father remarks at one point in the novel: 'on pourrait croire que le besoin de s'exprimer, de laisser une trace dans le

monde, est une force puissante; et pourtant en général ça ne suffit pas. Ce qui marche le mieux, ce qui pousse avec la plus grande violence les gens à se dépasser, c'est encore le pur et simple besoin d'argent'¹²² (CT, 43; 23). In a self-indicting comment, Jed suggests that if there has been something of a return to painting in contemporary art it is doubtless largely for commercial reasons: 'Un objet, c'est plus facile à stocker et à revendre qu'une installation, ou qu'une performance' (CT, 145; 96).¹²³ By the same token, Houellebecq is lucid about the reasons that might persuade 'Houellebecq' to write an exhibition catalogue: as Frédéric Beigbeder, also appearing as a character in the novel, points out, 'Houellebecq' is likely to do it for the money; after all, his venture into the Spanish property market fell through and, in addition, 'son divorce l'a complètement séché' ('his divorce has left him high and dry' (CT, 127; 84)). The base motive behind much of the art world also explains the murder narrative that occupies the final third of the novel. Given the horrifically gory crime scene, the investigating detective Jasselin initially believes he is searching for a rare breed of psychopath – a crazed fan, or perhaps a serial murderer. He is almost disappointed when he learns the value of the stolen painting: 'Il était assez déprimant de retomber en fin de compte sur la motivation criminelle la plus répandue, la plus universelle: l'argent' (CT, 354; 248).¹²⁴

Still, Jed's art, however much it is seen to be inseparable from financial considerations, plays a crucial role in *La Carte et le territoire* in encouraging us to think through this relationship between art and work. We are told that the future art historians who look back upon Jed's œuvre retrospectively interpret his entire output as 'un *hommage au travail humain*' ('a *homage to human labour*' (CT, 49; 27)). Indeed, his first major project, begun at art school, was a vast collection of photographs of objects comprising 'un catalogue exhaustif des objets de fabrication humaine à l'âge industriel' ('an exhaustive catalogue of the objects of human manufacturing in the industrial age' (CT, 39; 20)). But, even if Jed realises thousands of these photographs, the moment he starts to receive commissions to shoot objects for commercial catalogues he feels obliged to renounce artistic photography: 'Comme si le fait qu'il en soit venu à photographier ces objets dans un but purement professionnel, commercial, invalidait toute possibilité de les utiliser dans un projet créateur' (CT, 50; 28).¹²⁵ If such considerations would seem to reinforce the idea that art is a domain apart that refuses to play by the same rules as other professional activities, elsewhere Houellebecq's detailed descriptions of Jed's work serve to underline the *professionalism* of his

art. Houellebecq relates in precise detail the kinds of cameras and lenses Jed uses in his photographs, the types of paper and paint he favours for his portraits, as well as the painstaking process whereby he films and edits his final series of video works. Such detail serves to underline the real *labour* that goes into the artistic process and, by extension, implies the *hard work* – the long and complicated process of construction – of the novel itself, since it demonstrates the amount of research that must have gone into preparing *La Carte et le territoire*.

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

on vivait une période idéologiquement étrange, où tout un chacun en Europe occidentale semblait persuadé que le capitalisme était condamné, et même condamné à brève échéance, qu'il vivait ses toutes dernières années, sans que pourtant les partis d'ultra-gauche ne parviennent à

séduire au-delà de leur clientèle habituelle de masochistes hargneux.¹²⁶
(CT, 382–3; 269–70)

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

Self-portrait(s)

The complex meditation on issues of authenticity that characterises *La Carte et le territoire* – where and how would we locate an 'authentic'

France today in a country that has become a simulacrum of itself; where, if anywhere, can we find traces of authentic, meaningful, non-alienated labour and how can art help us to think through the processes and products of our work? – also affects Houellebecq's casting of himself as a character in the fiction since we cannot help but ask to what extent the fictional Houellebecq resembles the real one: who, or where, is the *authentic* Houellebecq in this game of mirrors? The fact that the narrative centres around a *portrait* of Houellebecq adds to this effect: this portrait painted by Jed becomes a self-portrait (since Jed is already a creation of Houellebecq's imagination) within the larger self-portrait that is Houellebecq's appearance as a character in the novel. It is thus a kind of self-portrait *en abyme* and Houellebecq clearly takes great relish in describing the painting in almost apocalyptic terms: 'l'auteur paraît en état de transe, possédé par une furie que certains n'ont pas hésité à qualifier de démoniaque' (CT, 180; 119).¹³⁰ Subsequent art historians could identify no pictorial tradition to which the subject's extraordinary gaze belonged aside from 'certaines images d'archives ethnologiques prises au cours de cérémonies vaudous' (CT, 181; 120).¹³¹ The novel contains a number of knowing asides on the subject of self-portraits – so many ironic winks aimed at the reader – as when it is revealed that Jed, despite his vast experience of photography, does not possess a single picture of himself and that the idea of realising a self-portrait has never occurred to him: 'jamais il ne s'était considéré, si peu que ce soit, comme un sujet artistique valable' (CT, 398; 281).¹³²

The portrait that Houellebecq sketches of himself in *La Carte et le territoire* appears, in many respects, to be an honest and accurate one, at least based on the impression we, as readers, have of the man from interviews, profiles and television appearances. Houellebecq acknowledges the acute awkwardness for others who find themselves in his company, his lengthy silences and his distraction (CT, 136; 89). He is practically a chain-smoker (CT, 138; 91) and also represented as drinking a lot, though this is clearly in significant measure a response to severe social anxiety (CT, 142; 94). He exhibits a naive enthusiasm for a handful of consumer products, as when he weeps at the memory of his favourite parka being discontinued (CT, 166; 110). In many respects, Houellebecq is unsparing in his depiction of himself and the portrait often comes across as very sad. Michel Houellebecq is first presented as 'un solitaire à fortes tendances misanthropiques, c'est à peine s'il adressait la parole à son chien' (CT, 124; 81).¹³³ The second time Jed visits him in Ireland, the writer comes to the door in his pyjamas, unkempt and a little smelly,

clearly depressed (CT, 160; 105). His house is barely furnished, with several boxes still unpacked three years after his move (CT, 134; 88). Since he is not expecting any visits, he moves his bed into the living room (CT, 161; 106); he tells Jed he cannot wait for the days to end so that he can take to his bed (CT, 140–1; 93). Houellebecq has become ‘manifestly indifferent’ to all human relations (CT, 170–1; 113). Indeed, when investigating his murder, the police discover that he has had no contact with any family for over ten years (CT, 301; 208). In places, this can come across as somewhat self-pitying. Houellebecq complains to Jed about being hated by the French media ‘to an incredible degree’ (CT, 143; 95). He suffers from an eczematic skin condition and wails ‘j’ai été honteusement abandonné par la médecine’ (CT, 173; 114).¹³⁴ Sometimes he sounds like a character from one of his earlier novels, whining, ‘ma vie s’achève, et je suis déçu. Rien de ce que j’espérais dans ma jeunesse ne s’est produit’ (CT, 252; 171).¹³⁵ But the novel’s self-awareness is such that this self-pity never has the chance to grow tiresome but is pulled up short by another perspective: ‘Là, j’ai l’impression que vous jouez un peu votre propre rôle...’, says Jed (CT, 141; 93).¹³⁶ For the most part, Houellebecq’s self-portrait is comically self-deprecating. When Jed first visits him, Houellebecq says he will recognise the house by its lawn, the worst-kept in the neighbourhood ‘and perhaps in all of Ireland’ (CT, 133; 87).¹³⁷ He explains that he is afraid of getting a lawnmower for fear of cutting off his fingers, and had considered getting a sheep instead but does not like them: ‘Il n’y a pas plus con qu’un mouton’ (CT, 134; 88).¹³⁸ Later, when he gets drunk and carried away, Houellebecq starts making up words, ‘worthy of Captain Haddock’ (CT, 168; 111). The last literary work he accomplishes before his death is a poem about his dog, Plato. He proudly states: ‘c’est un des meilleurs poèmes jamais écrits sur la philosophie de Platon – et probablement aussi sur les chiens’ (CT, 249; 169).¹³⁹ In one brilliantly accurate and unbelievably self-sabotaging line, Houellebecq is described as resembling ‘une vieille tortue malade’ (‘a sick old turtle’ (CT, 162; 107)). (It is tempting to believe that the photograph of the author on the novel’s back cover, particularly unflattering, was chosen specifically in order to confirm the validity of this comparison.) In short, Houellebecq has a rather clever way, in this novel, of feeling sorry for himself, yet at the same time coming off rather well. Philippe Gasparini has remarked about ageing writers’ depictions of themselves in print: ‘les portraits de l’artiste en vieil homme évitent difficilement l’écueil de la complaisance [mais], d’autre part [...] cette faiblesse, traduisant leur angoisse, les rend attachants’.¹⁴⁰ (We might note, in passing, that

Houellebecq takes the same approach to another real-life figure who appears as a character in the novel: his contemporary in French literature Frédéric Beigbeder. Houellebecq is not shy about depicting Beigbeder's drug use, his vanity or his thirst for publicity, yet ultimately pays him the high compliment of describing him as 'une sorte de Sartre des années 2010' (CT, 126; 83).¹⁴¹ Finally, the narrative of his own murder allows Houellebecq to indulge the fantasy of imagining his own death and observing his own funeral, exerting creative power over that domain in which we are most powerless. He takes pleasure in imagining the hypocritical, empty phrases pronounced by newspapers and politicians after his death (CT, 303; 210), describes his own gravestone (a ground-level slab of black basalt inscribed with the image of a Möbius strip (CT, 309; 214)), pictures a small crowd of 100 people respectfully following the funeral procession, and offers the romantic image of an unidentified woman in her thirties throwing a single white rose on the coffin as it is lowered into the ground (CT, 314; 218). Again, however, any self-aggrandisement is undercut by one crucial detail: the horrific murder having left little of Houellebecq's body intact, the funeral directors opt to put his remains in a child's coffin. The effect, we are told, is 'absolument navrant' ('absolutely awful' (CT, 312; 216)).

It has become quite common, in recent decades, for authors in French literature to write about themselves in a genre that has been dubbed 'autofiction' and popularised by the likes of Serge Doubrovsky (who coined the term) and Christine Angot. But *La Carte et le territoire* does not really belong to this trend in any very clear sense. Autofiction, as defined by Doubrovsky, has three notable characteristics: a literary style of writing (i.e., to distinguish it from simple autobiography or memoirs); the complete identification of author, narrator and hero; and a tendency for the narrative to constitute or contain a process of self-(psycho)analysis.¹⁴² It is necessarily the case that autofictions are generally written in the first person. Now *La Carte et le territoire* clearly does not meet these criteria, since it is written in the third person with an omniscient narrator and the novel's principal protagonist is not Houellebecq but Jed, with Houellebecq appearing instead as a secondary character in the fiction. For Philippe Gasparini, part of the distinctiveness, and the pleasure, of the autofiction lies in the ambiguous blending of believability and unbelievability. The reader will recognise many aspects of the hero's life as belonging truthfully to the author but may doubt whether all the events in the book really took place.¹⁴³ The author's life is thus fictionalised, and part of the fun of reading the

book is trying to guess which elements are real and which exaggerated or distorted. Again, however, this does not really apply to Houellebecq's novel. Yes, the portrait of Houellebecq is recognisable, and other figures in the novel have an attested existence in the real world (Beigbeder, Pernaut, Bellemare, etc.). But the novel's central intrigue, involving Jed's portrait of Houellebecq, is obviously pure invention, since Jed Martin does not correspond to any living artist. And Houellebecq's bloody murder cannot possibly be real, if only because he could not, then, have finished writing his book. In short, with *La Carte et le territoire*, Houellebecq seems to flirt with the fashion for autofiction, yet finds a form that is more ludic still, because it offers greater fictional licence. That said, Houellebecq doubtless shares some of the motivations that Gasparini sees in the turn towards autofiction. He suggests that authors often choose to project themselves into a fictional character because this dissimulation offers a kind of protection (both personal and legal) compared to the exposed confession of autobiography.¹⁴⁴ Writers may also favour a novelisation of their lives because it is assumed to have greater literary merit than straightforward autobiography, or because – precisely by being indirect or evasive – it represents a more honest attempt to grapple with the difficulty of self-knowledge, amply attested by modern psychology.¹⁴⁵

This latter concern can also be seen to motivate another form of self-writing identified by Michel Beaujour as the literary self-portrait. Given the fascination with, and knowingness about, portraiture in *La Carte et le territoire*, we might be tempted to ascribe Houellebecq's novel to this genre. But, again, the reality by no means matches the description. For Beaujour, the literary self-portrait avoids chronological narrative and is instead organised logically and thematically, its construction proceeding as a kind of associative montage.¹⁴⁶ Precursors of this genre include Montaigne's essays and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, while more recent examples would be the work of Michel Leiris or *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975). Again, however, the self-portrait as described by Beaujour has at least one characteristic that is resonant with Houellebecq's novel. The self-portrait, Beaujour states, is closely bound up with, and tends to grow out of, 'la retraite, l'oisiveté, le retrait' ('retirement, idleness, withdrawal').¹⁴⁷ This, at least, accords quite closely with the image of Houellebecq that we gain from *La Carte et le territoire*: the reclusive writer voluntarily cut off from society in Ireland or in the French countryside, free from financial concerns thanks to his earlier success and with nothing but time on his

hands. In being thus cut off from the real world, the literary self-portrait has a tendency to develop visions of Utopia¹⁴⁸ and if this is perhaps not noticeably true of *La Carte et le territoire* it is nonetheless a characteristic that we associate with Houellebecq (and that will be examined in detail in Chapter 3, below). At the same time, though, by growing out of idleness, the self-portrait is a guilty kind of writing since it comes across as useless and self-indulgent in a culture in which language is routinely instrumentalised, by politics, education and the media. The self-portrait thus becomes a kind of confession, not necessarily of a crime, but of its own uselessness.¹⁴⁹ One senses, at times in *La Carte et le territoire*, this kind of guilt on Houellebecq's part: it comes across in his extreme withdrawal from the world, his refusal to adopt a lifestyle befitting his celebrity status, as though sensing his very existence were an unreasonable burden on the world. In places, however, there is also a sense that Houellebecq is parodying the tradition of guilt and confession in literary self-portraits, for instance in his comically agonised discourse over pork products. When Jed first visits him, Houellebecq asserts soberly that he has given up eating pork since he considers it immoral to slaughter animals as sensitive and intelligent as pigs (CT, 135; 89). But when Jed returns a few months later, he finds Houellebecq's kitchen full of dried sausages and pâté: 'J'ai complètement replongé', cries the writer in despair ('I've completely relapsed' (CT, 162; 107)).

In short, though, *La Carte et le territoire* belongs to none of these genres of self-writing; quite simply, Michel Houellebecq appears as a character in his own novel. However, this is not the first time that Houellebecq has enjoyed a fictional existence between the pages of a book. Given the frequency with which French novels refer to the narrow community of the Parisian publishing set, it is hardly surprising that Houellebecq has featured in some of these works in more or less disguised form. For instance, Philippe Djian's *Vers chez les blancs* (2000) is a tale of professional and sexual intrigue set in precisely this milieu that seems to refer to Houellebecq. One writer in the story, Patrick Vandhoeren, becomes the target of jealousy due to his enormous success and his uncommon talent for writing sex scenes. He is more specifically linked to Houellebecq by vague references to his 'théorie sur la misère sexuelle' ('theory of sexual poverty').¹⁵⁰ But the similarities to Houellebecq end there, since Patrick Vandhoeren is presented as a confident, energetic, masculine character, even proving to be an aggressive soccer player – hardly qualities associated with the author of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*.

A more extensive and accurate portrait of Houellebecq is to be found in Pierre Mérot's *Arkansas* (2008). Partly inspired by the narrative of *La Possibilité d'une île*, and by the media frenzy that accompanied the publication of that novel (described in the introduction to this volume), *Arkansas* features a central character with the unremarkable name of François Court who adopts the more intriguing soubriquet of Kurtz, with explicit reference to Joseph Conrad and *Apocalypse Now*. Like Houellebecq, Kurtz was born on the island of Réunion, where his hippie mother still lives, though he lies about his date of birth. He found global success with his first three novels – *Entreprises*, *Clonages* and *Tourismes* – and critics began to compare him to Balzac. He also shares Houellebecq's tastes and mannerisms: his constant exhaustion and distraction, his idiosyncratic way of holding a cigarette, his wardrobe acquired from Monoprix, his enthusiasm for holidays in Thailand and his claims to value poetry over the novel. Having made his fortune, he moves to Spain. Kurtz, it is said, cut all his ties as he rose to fame, publicly betraying his former friends as he oversaw his own rebirth, seemingly wanting to be as famous as Michael Jackson or Madonna.¹⁵¹ There is clearly some bitterness in Mérot's portrait of Houellebecq. A comic writer of a similar age to his more famous rival, Mérot's novels explore comparable territory of depressed, isolated single men whose lives are marked principally by alcohol and sexual misadventure, yet Mérot has had none of Houellebecq's international success. He accuses Houellebecq's novels of giving off 'l'impression générale d'une médiocrité enrobée, d'une facilité inaboutie, d'une esthétique du mépris'.¹⁵² Claiming that the media are more interested in people than in books, Mérot writes that Kurtz/Houellebecq 'a donc écrit de mauvais livres pour qu'on s'intéresse à lui'.¹⁵³ If Mérot is at risk of appearing simply jealous, however, he is lucid enough to see the difference between himself and Houellebecq: 'Contrairement à ce qu'on pense, il est allé vers ses semblables. Il a regardé le monde [...] Il s'est mêlé à la foule alors que je grommelle dans mon coin'.¹⁵⁴ As though to demonstrate his point, *Arkansas* includes several parodies of Houellebecq's style – his eulogies of cheap consumer goods, his detached scientific descriptions of natural phenomena, his casual pornography – but without ever attaining the universal significance of Houellebecq's best writing. In the latter part of the novel, Kurtz acquires a large ranch (named 'Arkansas') in Spain where he tries to set up a utopian community that rapidly comes to resemble more closely a resurrection cult from whose faithful Kurtz extorts large sums of money. The ranch also serves as a glorified

harem with a dozen or so nude teenagers offering sexual favours to the members. Eventually, Kurtz, driven crazy by alcohol, self-delusion and, possibly, a brain tumour, tortures and murders his followers before setting fire to his property with him inside it. If this constitutes something like a revenge fantasy for Mérot, he is careful not to align himself too closely with any one perspective in the novel. *Arkansas* is partly narrated by an ageing writer named Traum, a former friend of Houellebecq who ultimately becomes a witness, and accessory, to his death. It is initially tempting to see a close correspondence between Traum and Mérot (they both share a five-letter name with the same three consonants in reverse order plus two vowels), yet the narrative comes increasingly under the influence of a first-person narrator who acts as Traum's secretary and gradually sows the suspicion that Traum himself may be sick, drunk or delirious...

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

(CT, 191; 127), preferably one in which he were alone (CT, 396; 280). In a final similarity to Houellebecq, however, all this social awkwardness is in a sense redeemed by the broad appeal and social significance of Jed's art. Jed's work, like Houellebecq's, is described as coming out of 'une réflexion froide, détachée sur l'état du monde' ('a cold, detached reflection on the state of the world' (CT, 60; 35)). And, in the course of painting his many portraits, Jed comes to the conclusion, familiar from Houellebecq's work, that 'les gens se ressemblent beaucoup plus qu'on ne le dit habituellement' (CT, 171; 113).¹⁵⁵

If Houellebecq represents himself in *La Carte et le territoire*, then, it is not in the sense implied by the title of Baudelaire's autobiographical text *Mon cœur mis à nu* ('My heart laid bare'). Houellebecq's self-portrait is painfully honest in places, but comically exaggerated elsewhere; it shares elements of different genres of life-writing but remains stubbornly fictional; and the portrait is deceptively dispersed across more than one character. This elusiveness which Houellebecq seems to enjoy cultivating in *La Carte et le territoire* is also brought about by the style of the novel. In many ways, *La Carte et le territoire* is unlike the Houellebecq that readers have come to know and expect. The most striking difference from earlier works is the absence of sex. True, the character of Olga – stunningly beautiful, disconcertingly successful and inexplicably attracted to the rather gauche Jed – is very similar to *Plateforme's* Valérie, and her lack of hesitation in abandoning the relationship to take up a promotion in Russia recalls Esther's similarly casual dismissal of Daniel when she moves to New York in *La Possibilité d'une île*. But there is almost no description of actual sexual activity – Olga and Jed's first sexual relations are discreetly elided – and very little noticeable sexual objectification of female characters. In general, Houellebecq seems more sympathetic and generous to his characters in *La Carte et le territoire*. When he first meets with success, Jed employs a press secretary, named Marilyn, who is cruelly described as ugly, neurotic and with a constant snuffle, 'une petite chose souffreteuse, maigre et presque bossue', and elsewhere 'ce pauvre petit bout de femme, au vagin inexploré' (CT, 76; 46).¹⁵⁶ This portrait inevitably recalls the infamous Catherine Lechardoy in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and 'Ce trou qu'elle avait au bas du ventre [et] qui devait lui apparaître tellement inutile' (EDL, 47; 44).¹⁵⁷ However, and almost as though in direct response to criticisms of misogyny in Houellebecq's work, when Jed meets Marilyn again for the 'Métiers' project, she has been transformed: better dressed and with a stylish haircut, Marilyn

has cured her constant sniffles, become more confident, and now chats openly about her busy sex life (CT, 151–2; 100). One sometimes has the impression, in other words, that Houellebecq's writing has become more *restrained* with *La Carte et le territoire*. There is less sarcasm and there are fewer angry outbursts. There is perhaps more free indirect speech, and frequent use of that other favourite Flaubertian technique, the italics used with a gentle irony to designate received ideas: 'Certes, il était plutôt *joli garçon*, mais dans un genre petit et mince pas tellement recherché en général par les femmes – l'image de la brute virile qui *assure au pieu* revenait en force depuis quelques années...' (CT, 70; 42).¹⁵⁸ Houellebecq's future predictions are more restrained as well: rather than apocalyptic visions of the end of the human species, in *La Carte et le territoire* he paints a broadly optimistic portrait of France in the mid-twenty-first century, with the birth rate on the rise and educated, entrepreneurial citizens repopulating the countryside, at ease with high technology and making the most of France's (almost exclusively) touristic economy (CT, 398–403; 281–4). Yet, among all this restraint and positivity, there are moments in the novel that seem like a self-parodic return to Houellebecq's most well-trodden territory. The whole of chapter 4 of the novel's first section reads like a digest of Houellebecq's pet themes and stylistic tropes, containing sweeping generalisations (about Russians (CT, 69; 41)), distant anthropological description of human sexuality (CT, 70–1; 42), comical portraits of the Parisian celebrity milieu (complete with caricature of Beigbeder) (CT, 71–3; 42–3), the first, vicious characterisation of Marilyn, described above, and the improbable suggestion that Jed has never read a newspaper in his life (CT, 77; 47).

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

of Liszt's late chamber music has a particularly languorous tone that betrays his singular voice:

Il n'y a peut-être aucune musique qui exprime, aussi bien que les derniers morceaux de musique de chambre composés par Franz Liszt, ce sentiment funèbre et doux du vieillard dont tous les amis sont déjà morts, dont la vie est essentiellement terminée, qui appartient en quelque sorte déjà au passé et qui sent à son tour la mort s'approcher, qui la voit comme une sœur, comme une amie, comme la promesse d'un retour à la maison natale.¹⁵⁹
(CT, 283; 196)

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

There are moments, in this third section, where *La Carte et le territoire*

seems to revert to a kind of ‘Houellebecq-by-numbers’, as though the risks of tackling an unfamiliar genre led the author to retreat to some of his most tried-and-tested tropes. Such is the case when, as Jasselin reflects that in order to withstand the spectacle of the murder scene he will need to adopt the impassive perspective of a fly on the wall, Houellebecq tosses out a quick encyclopaedic description of *Musca domestica* (CT, 265–6; 182–3). Or the dry, neutral passage in which he describes the duties of a *commissaire de police* (CT, 269; 185). In fact, it was revealed, after publication of the novel, that both these passages contained material lifted directly from the French Wikipedia.¹⁶⁰ Yet, alongside such lazy copying and pasting, we find, in *La Carte et le territoire*, some of Houellebecq’s very best writing: much of the third section of the novel offers the jubilant spectacle of a writer at the height of his powers thoroughly enjoying himself. One example would be the masterful paragraph of skewed logic and comic precision which relates how Jasselin became a cop: he had been interested in the law until his parents’ divorce revealed to him ‘ce mélange de fourberie et de paresse à quoi se résume le comportement professionnel d’un avocat’ (CT, 284; 196);¹⁶¹ this leads into idle speculation as to why more divorcing couples do not resort to homicide before reaching the comically simplistic conclusion that ‘La peur du gendarme était décidément la vraie base de la société humaine’ (CT, 284; 197),¹⁶² which explains Jasselin’s choice of profession – QED! Similarly exultant is the paragraph describing the species history of the Bichon Bolognese (and concluding that its only *raison d’être* is to bring joy and happiness to humans (CT, 289–90; 200)), which provides the comic image of the dog accompanying Jasselin’s partner to her teaching job at a university and providing adorable and ironic commentary on her lectures about Keynes and Schumpeter (CT, 290; 201); before ending with a consideration of the difficulties of travelling with pets that allows Houellebecq to condemn airlines as ‘intrinsically fascist organisations’ (CT, 290; 201). A final example might be the paragraph of reflections following the revelation that the dog’s testicles never dropped: far from hindering the dog’s life, this asexuality actually makes him ‘plus soumis, plus doux, plus joyeux et plus pur’ (CT, 293; 202).¹⁶³ The paragraph reads like a bathetic and self-mocking parody of Houellebecq’s science-fiction narratives of asexual futures, and indeed leads to the familiar – in fact comically overdetermined – conclusion that sexuality is ‘la source de tout conflit, de tout massacre, de toute souffrance’ (CT, 293; 203).¹⁶⁴

In short, *La Carte et le territoire* contains some of the most facile passages of Houellebecq’s work as well as some of the most original,

some of the most predictable and some of the most surprising. But, as with much of the earlier work, one of the most striking features of Houellebecq's writing is the way in which it deflects criticism by pre-empting it: whenever you think you have pinned Houellebecq down, he pulls out an unexpected trump card; yet even in his most inspiring and inventive passages he can sometimes become a caricature of himself. It remains that self-criticism and self-sabotage are among Houellebecq's most effective tools of self-defence. As François Raynaert remarked upon the novel's publication, Houellebecq left little room for critics to manoeuvre: 'qu'est-ce qui lui reste à dire, à la malheureuse [presse], si même les commentaires sur l'auteur sont déjà dans le bouquin?'¹⁶⁵ Or, as Nancy Huston put it, in a text that was published long before *La Carte et le territoire*, 'l'autodétestation le protège efficacement, car personne ne peut le haïr autant que lui'.¹⁶⁶

Conclusion

Plateforme depicts a world that is governed, above all, by economic laws and in which people are defined by their professional status and their value in the labour market, a world where the pressure of capitalist competition appears all-consuming. In *Plateforme*, however, the proposed solution to the misery generated by this social organisation comes not from a radical rejection or overturning of this model, but rather from an appropriation of one of the solutions that capitalism itself offers for its internal contradictions: tourism, emblematic of the commodified leisure culture of a post-industrial age, is an eminently capitalist panacea for the stresses and disappointments of the working life, that promises relaxation through consumption while subjugating and exploiting another class of people who, because of uneven distribution of wealth throughout the world, have little choice but to serve the interests of the tourist class. Tourism, then, in *Plateforme*, is representative of the quantification of happiness that occurs in all of contemporary consumer culture, but is representative, too, of the attitude the developed world takes towards its developing neighbours, an attitude that is superficially 'respectful' but that, ultimately, serves only to maintain those cultures in a position of economic dependence. Houellebecq's novel contains much acute satire on the ways in which tourist behaviour serves to shore up the social cohesion and class-identification of first-world travellers at the expense of their hosts. Houellebecq's most controversial move

in *Plateforme* is therefore, in many ways, a logical one. Combining the lucrative market of tourism with the equally burgeoning field of the sex industry (already discussed at length in *Les Particules élémentaires*) gives sex tourism as a ‘natural’ economic outcome. In a capitalist consumer economy, alienated sexuality becomes a self-reinforcing problem, since the sexually unsatisfied are led to purchase sex in various forms thereby necessarily increasing its commodified status and further distancing the possibility of sex as a spontaneous expression of affection or desire. In a society in which capitalism has become thoroughly naturalised, Houellebecq suggests in *Plateforme*, mass prostitution can be seen as a logical consequence for sexuality. As with his earlier discussion of sexual malaise in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *Les Particules*, or his evocation of genetically modified futures in his science-fiction narratives, much of the controversy of Houellebecq’s idea comes from the apparently cold, posthumanist stance adopted in explaining it: sex tourism is presented not as a shameful violation of the human rights of thousands of individual Thai women but rather as a structural necessity responding to a sexual–economic deadlock in the west and a disparity of supply and demand between the developed and developing worlds. Notwithstanding this problematic tone, however, our analysis has suggested that Houellebecq actually shares many of the conclusions of scholars and activists engaged with the question of sex tourism, even if there is sometimes a troublingly neocolonialist attitude to some of his accounts of the sex tourist encounter. Still, it would be hasty to accuse Houellebecq of racism, and this chapter has sought to disentangle the ‘ethnic’ controversy of *Plateforme*, suggesting that it came about through a conflation of several different, ostensibly unrelated, strands of the novel. Admittedly, there is some stereotyping in *Plateforme* but, as always with Houellebecq, the attribution of authorial intention behind these comments remains difficult, which means that any critical response to the novel is beset by pitfalls.

La Carte et le territoire extends many of the concerns of *Plateforme*, and especially its preoccupation with globalisation, by depicting the economic decline of France and its dwindling cultural significance on the world stage. In the novel, traditional French culture has become the object of commodified nostalgia, a ‘hyperreal’ Frenchness created to be sold to foreign tourists. As such, the novel constitutes an extended reflection on the disappearance or alienation of traditional forms of labour. If it sometimes seems nostalgic for this traditional work, and nostalgic, too, for a romantic conception of art and artists, the novel

elsewhere shows clearly how the art world ascribes monetary value to individuals just as much as the worlds of work and sex that came in for criticism in earlier novels. Michel Houellebecq's self-portrait in *La Carte et le territoire* seems designed precisely as a way of avoiding this reification of the artist since it proves so very difficult to pin down, by turns self-aggrandising and self-deprecating and always refracted through different perspectives, just as the narration of *La Carte et le territoire* often seems to promise familiar territories or tropes only to take unexpected new turns.

CHAPTER THREE

Science and Religion

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, Schopenhauer

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).⁴

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).⁵ Various critics have suggested that we could see a kind of sexual terror underpinning Lovecraft’s imagery of viscous, tentacular creatures,⁶ 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).⁷ 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).⁸ 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).⁹ 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)¹⁰ 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).¹¹ 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*.¹² 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).¹³ 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).¹⁴

This is the key to Houellebecq's reading of Lovecraft – this idea that 'la vie, c'est le mal'.¹⁵ 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).¹⁶ 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).¹⁷ 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 victoriennees'. 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).²⁶ 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)²⁷ – 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).²⁸

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’.²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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!'.³¹ 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 contemporary 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.³² 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).³³ 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 sexuel est mort, écrit Schopenhauer, le véritable noyau de la vie est consumé' (*PI*, 217; 189).³⁴ 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 (*I*, 71–4/*I2*, 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’.³⁵ 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’.³⁶ 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),³⁷ reads the first line of *Rester vivant*, followed a couple of pages later by: ‘souffrir, toujours souffrir’ (*RV*, 11)³⁸ and ‘Et revenez toujours à la source, qui est la souffrance’ (*RV*, 11).³⁹ In short, as Place-Verghnes suggests, ‘la souffrance est le concept fondateur de l’idéologie houellebecquienne, celui dont tout dérive’.⁴⁰ 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’,⁴¹ 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’.⁴²

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’.⁴³ 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”.⁴⁶

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’.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

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’.⁴⁹ 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 predetermination, 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 quintessence 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.⁵⁶ 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).⁵⁷ 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).⁵⁸ 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*).⁵⁹ 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).⁶⁰ 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 XIV^e 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).⁶³

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).⁶⁴ 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).⁶⁵ 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).⁶⁶ 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).⁶⁷

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).⁶⁸ 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’ (PI, 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’ (PI, 28; 19);⁶⁹ 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’ (PI, 28–9; 19).⁷⁰ 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’ (PI, 385; 343).⁷¹

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’ (PI, 41; 31)⁷² 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).⁷³ 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).⁷⁴ 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).⁷⁵ 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).⁷⁶ 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 (*PI*, 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' (*PI*, 94; 79).⁷⁷ As a comedian, Daniel senses that, although he may successfully ridicule dated customs and practices such as 'religiosity, sentimentalism, devotion, a sense of honour' (*PI*, 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' (*PI*, 227; 198).⁷⁸ 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. Daniel²⁵ 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,⁷⁹ 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'.⁸⁰ 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).⁸¹ 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).⁸²

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 'à toutes les apparences d'un suicide collectif' (*PI*, 43; 33).⁸³ 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).⁸⁴ I have remarked elsewhere⁸⁵ 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.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?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'.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.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'.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, *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'.⁹¹ 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'.⁹² 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).⁹³ 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 Elohimites' 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 Elohimites 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 Elohimites 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).⁹⁵

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 Elohimites, 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.⁹⁶ Despite their lives being completely separate, they are also practically identical: as Daniel24 comments, ‘nous nous connaissons isolés mais semblables’⁹⁷ (*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),⁹⁸ 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).⁹⁹ 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*.¹⁰⁰ 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’.¹⁰¹ But Fredric Jameson notes that this criticism – that Utopias are boring – is one that has been commonly levelled at utopian fictions.¹⁰² 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.¹⁰³

We need to remember that Houellebecq’s future society is separated from ours by thousands of years¹⁰⁴ 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,¹⁰⁵ 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;¹⁰⁶ 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.¹⁰⁷

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, Daniel²⁵ leaves his compound and strikes out alone in search of something else, following in this the model of Marie²³, 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 other 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).¹⁰⁸ 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*, 465; 414).¹⁰⁹ 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,¹¹⁰ 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'.¹¹¹ 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).¹¹³ 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'.¹¹⁴ 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).¹¹⁵ 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).¹¹⁶ 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.¹¹⁷ 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)).¹¹⁸ 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.¹¹⁹ 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).¹²⁰ 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 outrepassse l’instinct de survie, le mécanisme grippe, le rire est arrêté dans son principe’ (PI, 234; 204).¹²¹ 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).¹²² 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).¹²³

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.¹²⁴ 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).¹²⁵ 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).¹²⁶ 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).¹²⁷ 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 Raélians 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 (*PI*, 266; 233–4) and communal love, what the prophet calls ‘l’amour véritable, non-possessif’ (‘the true, unpossessive love’ (*PI*, 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 (*PI*, 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 Kaprièlian 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.¹²⁹ 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).¹³⁰ 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 (*L2*, 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).¹³¹ 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).¹³² 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’ (*PI*, 352; 311).¹³³

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);¹³⁴ 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)¹³⁵). 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).¹³⁶ *La Possibilité d’une île* 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.¹⁴⁰ 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.

Conclusion

Humanity and its Aftermath

The goal of this book has been to show that the writing of Michel Houellebecq helps us to think about what it means to be human in an era that can be considered posthumanist in two respects: first, that more than ever we have an understanding of how our own species is governed by patterns of behaviour whose causality is ultimately not that different from that found in other animals; and second, that we have within our grasp the possibility of real genetic and prosthetic modifications that could operate an 'improvement' upon the basic model of *Homo sapiens*. In his discussions of sexuality, Houellebecq shows how we are caught between these two conceptions. On the one hand, sex remains a brutal competition for the most eligible mates and one's stock in the sexual marketplace is largely determined by genetic factors entirely beyond one's own control. But, on the other hand, we are irreparably alienated from relating to our sexuality in any 'natural' or instinctual way because we are surrounded by sexual prostheses. These may include literal bodily additions such as sex toys or cosmetic enhancements, but most commonly these prostheses take the form of the endless sexual representations we are obliged to consume and that have the ultimate effect of turning our own sexuality into a representation from which we are chronically distanced (hence the problem of 'performance anxiety' which arises from the fear that the instinctual physical response will not match up to the representation). In ideological terms, our western societies circulate both a persistent social Darwinism, leading to the belief that only the strongest and most genetically 'blessed' deserve sexual happiness, but also a popular democratic socialism implying that everyone is entitled to expect their share of sexual ecstasy. In all this confusion, it is unsurprising that some individuals slip through the

erotic net altogether, and are left unsure whether their reaction should be one of resignation to their fate or bitterness at a perceived injustice. *Plateforme* and *La Carte et le territoire*, meanwhile, create a vision of the economic universe. Here is a humanity irrevocably overtaken by the prosthesis of the global economy, a superstructure that grows out of human relations and yet comes to determine those relations in unpredictable and unintended ways. *Plateforme* can be understood as an experiment in trying to think through the consequences of conceiving human relations from the perspective of this posthuman logic. In both novels can be detected a nostalgia for forms of work that could be more immediately meaningful to our human condition, and yet this nostalgia is little more than a distant echo, barely articulable from our position following decades of alienated, post-industrial labour. After all, as Jed Martin's eerie artworks demonstrate in *La Carte et le territoire*, all work is already a sort of technology, an improvement, or at least a supplementation of the human, including and perhaps especially the work of art, so there is doubtless no way out of this bind. *La Possibilité d'une île* is, in many ways, Houellebecq's most representative book, the fullest expression of his vision, both of the ruthless contest that organises our socio-sexual world, but also of a genuinely posthuman successor that might finally surpass this model. It remains that, from within the blinkered perspective of our individualist consciousness, *both* visions of life come across as frankly miserable. This is why Houellebecq may ultimately be seen to suggest that the only way to transcend our social problems is not through politics but through a reshaping of society and thought that would be more akin to a religion. In the end, however, we must accept that Houellebecq is not really prescribing solutions, and nor is it necessarily his role to do so. Like earlier generations of utopian writers, Houellebecq uses his hypothetical futures in order to point up the problems and contradictions of the present (indeed, *Plateforme* presents something like the parody of a 'solution' as though to demonstrate the absurd inadequacy of the current ideological deadlock in which capitalism can only propose itself as a solution to the problems caused by capitalism). What Houellebecq is doing, through the posthumanist perspective of his novels, is allowing us to see ourselves in a new light, to diagnose our problems more clearly and to feel them more keenly, and this is why he has been widely acclaimed as the most important writer to emerge from Europe in recent decades.

Animal

Throughout his work, Michel Houellebecq consistently places human beings within a continuum that stretches from the animal, through the human, to the posthuman. In doing so, he invites us to interrogate the nature of the human, and to replace humanity within the broad evolutionary sweep of organic life on this planet. Given that various of Houellebecq's characters confess to hating nature (*PE*, 262; 314; *L*, 24; 24), it is remarkable that, the more one looks, one can find numerous examples of animal life in his novels. *Plateforme*, just to take one example, mentions everything from insects to rhinoceroses, via all manner of fish (the curious passage, at once dreamlike and matter-of-fact, about silurids and silurid fishers (*P*, 14–15; 9–10)), amphibians (the toad that inspires a moment of existential contemplation in Michel (*P*, 127–8; 129–30)) and sundry mammals, a word never employed innocently by Houellebecq but always intended to remind us of humanity's animal inheritance, as in the tourist diners described as 'Deux mammifères devant un crustacé' ('Two mammals in search of a crustacean' (*P*, 105; 105)): we are never allowed to forget that human beings, too, are part of the natural world, subject to instincts and appetites and perhaps, ultimately, to predation and extinction.

Of course, comparing humans to animals is, in itself, not very meaningful or original; it is, in fact, as Mary Midgley pointed out in the 1970s, 'obscure' since we have no clear basis for opposing humans to animals. As Midgley put it, 'Drawing analogies "between people and animals" is, on the face of it, rather like drawing them "between foreigners and people"'.¹ In reality, according to Midgley, what we do most often when comparing people to animals is to project human traits on to the rest of the animal kingdom. We like to think of ferocity as an 'animalistic' quality, yet most large predators are rarely aggressive to members of their own species: if they were, given the highly adapted killing equipment of their claws and fangs, the species would doubtless soon die out. On the contrary, it is human beings who have shown the most persistent and exaggerated tendencies towards intra-species aggression and Midgley speculates that this may be because, lacking the bodily tools that allow for swift and effortless killing, humans never evolved the inhibitions that seem to go along with them in order to ensure species survival.² To take another example closer to Houellebecq's interests, it is also common to use animal analogies to imply that a person is unusually fixated upon, or frenzied in the pursuit

of, sexual behaviour. Again, however, it is only for *Homo sapiens* that sexuality is such a constant and all-pervading source of attention and anxiety; for most other species, writes Midgley, sex is confined to ‘a seasonal disturbance with a definite routine, comparable to Christmas shopping’.³

Is Houellebecq guilty of such thoughtless comparisons between people and animals? From time to time, perhaps. *Plateforme* contains a handful of examples in which animals are hastily ascribed certain conventional characteristics that ultimately bespeak human categories of judgement: thus lizards are ‘lethargic’ (P, 17; 11), sheep are ‘stupid’ (P, 25; 21), dogs are obedient (P, 46; 42) and pigs dirty (P, 105; 104). Elsewhere, however, the comparison to animals, even animals of relatively low status in human eyes, serves to reflect badly on *Homo sapiens*. Sheep may be stupid, but so is the brother of Aïcha who murdered Michel’s father, and at least sheep are not prone to violent reactions (P, 25–6; 21). The copulation of the cockroach apparently has none of the grace or joy of human lovemaking, but it is far more efficient in terms of the reproduction of the species, which will doubtless be around long after humans have perished: ‘nous ne pouvons absolument rien contre les cafards’, notes Michel wistfully (‘There is absolutely nothing we can do about cockroaches’ (P, 54; 50)). Most often, perhaps, the comparison to animals serves to imply that humanity’s claims to superior intelligence and (especially) social sophistication are greatly exaggerated. The descriptions of humans’ herd-like behaviour – with their inescapable, if distant, echoes of Nietzsche – memorably have this effect, as when Michel observes that people do not so much live ‘together’ but rather ‘les uns à côté des autres comme des bœufs’ (‘alongside one another like cattle’ (P, 26; 21)). By the same token, when Houellebecq evokes higher mammals, such as apes or dolphins, it is not in order to exclaim over their most advanced characteristics (intelligence, sociability, language), but instead to stress the more basic and less charming aspects of their behaviour that are often overlooked: contrary to their popular image, insists Valérie, dolphins live in strictly hierarchical communities and often display aggression towards one another (P, 215; 222), characteristics all too evident in human beings. Human society, in short, can be considered, in Houellebecq’s novels, as ‘a natural environment’, comparable to a jungle or a savannah, to whose laws people are obliged to adapt in order to survive (P, 320; 330).

Human

The implication of all this, of course, is that human beings, if they are indeed comparable to all other animals, are no more *free* than other animals, that is to say that they are just as tied to their genetic inheritance and species-level instinct as spiders, or porpoises, or leopards. The British political philosopher John Gray would agree with Houellebecq in this respect. He argues that the belief in human beings' ability to choose the way they live is a Christian moral inheritance and that a naturalistic, or Darwinian, conception of the world affords no such hope. As Gray notes: 'We do not speak of a time when whales or gorillas will be masters of their destinies. Why then humans?'⁴ Or, as Houellebecq puts it, when Michel muses on what he sees as the predominantly hormonal determinants of his personality: 'Dans la plupart des circonstances de ma vie, j'ai été à peu près aussi libre qu'un aspirateur' (*P*, 94; 92).⁵ But what exactly does all this mean? Must we conclude that there is no such thing as free will? This would probably be hasty since, even if we are able to identify certain genetic or chemical causes for particular patterns of behaviour, Mary Midgley cautions that '*all* causes are incomplete' and that 'determinism remains something highly theoretical and remote'.⁶ As John Dupré has noted, in an example close to Houellebecq's own areas of interest, if it were possible to identify a mechanism in the human brain that disposed men to select very young women as ideal mates, it is still not clear that this would tell us 'anything much about the behaviour or even behavioural dispositions of modern humans', because this atavistic mechanism would be only one of several inputs affecting mate selection and might itself affect a variety of other behaviours in unpredictable ways.⁷

It is therefore dubious to use evolutionary theory as a straightforward argument against the existence of any kind of free will and, by extension, any moral doctrine, as Houellebecq does sometimes seem tempted to do. In *Ennemis publics*, for instance, after Bernard-Henri Lévy upholds the Judeo-Christian notion of the special dignity of human beings because they have been created by God, Houellebecq rejects this idea, arguing that there is no difference of nature, only a difference of degree, between humans and other living creatures. All simply represent different points within the vast adventure of evolution and if, at some stage in the not-too-distant future, machines develop consciousness, then they too will simply constitute another stage of the same process. Importantly, however, Houellebecq goes on to argue that Lévy's very public declarations of

political commitment around a number of worthy causes are ultimately underwritten by his faith in the special (i.e., divinely favoured) nature of humanity. The implication is that since Houellebecq does not share this faith he is not capable of any such commitment and he admits he is baffled by the political engagement of atheist friends which strikes him as altogether groundless (*EP*, 147–8; 142–3). Now, questioning the grounds of a political commitment is not the same thing as denying the legitimacy of any morality, but the potential for slippage between the two is worrisome, and perhaps explains some of the controversy that Houellebecq has succeeded in stirring up in his work. But the idea that human behaviour is largely dictated by a complex set of genetically determined instincts is not necessarily incompatible with a moral sense. Mary Midgley speculates that primitive *Homo sapiens*, like other large creatures, may have had some kind of in-built inhibition against killing his own kind, but that, relative to other species, this inhibition was ‘weak and often overborne’. This leads Midgley to the intriguing, if somewhat counter-intuitive suggestion that human morality may have developed, along with intelligence, as a way of making sense of the feelings of remorse that would accompany the infringement of a more basic, instinctual prohibition. As she puts it, ‘Conceptual thought formalizes and extends what instinct started’.⁸

In any case, when seeking to account for human behaviour, we must consider not only Darwinian natural selection, but also cultural evolution, which, as John Dupré points out, operates quite differently. The transmission of culture can occur laterally, within the same generation, which may exert a stronger influence than the vertical inheritance of cultural norms and values from preceding generations; cultural evolution must be assumed to be Lamarckian, in the sense that acquired characteristics are transmitted to recipients; and, if cultural evolution may also require some concept of ‘fitness’ to determine ‘the tendency of cultural variants to be transmitted to other individuals’, it is not clear to what extent this concept would map on to the equivalent notion within the theory of natural selection.⁹ It is this process of cultural evolution that Houellebecq is most often describing in his novels, especially, and most famously, in the ‘sociological’ passages of *Les Particules élémentaires*. This is how Houellebecq documents the change in attitudes towards sex that ultimately leads to the dispiriting sexual predicament that he has been lamenting since *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. *Les Particules* shows how Bruno’s generation acquire their patterns of sexual behaviour less from their parents than from their peers within the same

generation, drawing influence from media representations, counter-cultural movements in North America, etc. These acquired sexual characteristics are then passed on to, and developed in, the subsequent generation, leading to the kind of casual sexual ruthlessness that we witness in Esther's generation in *La Possibilité d'une île*. If this cultural understanding of sexuality is 'fit' to be transmitted between individuals and between generations, it is because it aligns itself neatly with the globally dominant ideology of acquisitive capitalist individualism and not necessarily because it maximises the chances of our species to perpetuate itself; on the contrary, Houellebecq repeatedly suggests that the opposite may be true.

Posthuman

One of the most intriguing questions posed by Houellebecq's novels, and in particular by the futuristic finales of *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d'une île*, is the extent to which human cultural evolution might be consciously guided or directed by humans themselves. It is accepted that the process of natural selection is taking place blindly, in response to local environmental conditions, and is not organised by any purpose, direction or goal. On the other hand, writes John Dupré, 'cultural evolution suggests no obstacle to the idea that change may be directed, and may even be directed in the service of objectives such as freedom and justice'.¹⁰ Indeed, argues Dupré, since it is cultural evolution, rather than natural selection, that 'accounts for the speed at which human nature changes over historical time', it is possible to surmise that 'human nature may perhaps, in the long run, be a product of human creation'.¹¹ John Gray, of course, would object to such an optimistic view. He writes: 'The idea of humanity taking charge of its destiny makes sense only if we ascribe consciousness and purpose to the species', but consciousness and purpose, to the extent that they exist at all, are characteristics of individuals and not species; species, in Gray's evocative phrase, 'are only currents in the drift of genes'.¹² The idea of a directed cultural evolution – in short, the humanist belief in progress – is, in Gray's blunt dismissal, 'not science, but religion'.¹³ With this in mind, I would contend that one of the most far-reaching insights in all of Houellebecq's work is the idea, most fully explored in *La Possibilité d'une île*, that, for humanity to embrace and accelerate its own evolution towards a posthuman successor would require a massive conversion

whose character we can only identify as religious even if, as the deadpan satire of *La Possibilité* makes clear, many of the adepts have less than purely spiritual motivations for converting. After all, mass conversions on this scale and in this manner are not without precedent in the history of humanity, as the last 2000 years have amply demonstrated.

John Gray, on the other hand, argues that the posthuman evolution of our species, if and when it happens, will not come about as the result of some unified paradigm shift but rather will be effected ‘haphazardly, as an upshot of struggles in the murky realm where big business, organised crime, and the hidden parts of government vie for control’.¹⁴ Any such transformation will necessarily be propelled by developments in technology but, insists Gray, we would be just as deluded if we saw ourselves as masters of our own technological progress: ‘Technology is not something that humankind can control’, he writes ominously, ‘It is an event that has befallen the world’.¹⁵ Some commentators have sought to imagine a future in which genetic technologies would be harnessed by governments in a sort of positive eugenics designed to engineer social justice. ‘Eugenics’, here, would no longer mean the genocide or enforced sterilisation of certain groups, but rather guaranteeing the availability of biotechnologies to all in order to facilitate the social mobility of ‘genetically disadvantaged people’.¹⁶ But such progressive legislation seems frankly implausible when we take into account the vast profits to be made in biotechnology by private enterprise, especially in a society like that of the USA where the medical establishment is geared more towards the profits of pharmaceutical and insurance corporations than towards preventive medicine or social welfare.¹⁷ A beneficent state-sponsored biotechnology seems further unlikely given the conflicting biases of different political groups: as Francis Fukuyama points out, it is hard to see how this issue could fail to provoke what may be irreconcilable divisions between economic libertarians and social conservatives.¹⁸ Chris Hables Gray argues that change in this area will be driven less by governments than by individual parents ‘who will be the strongest advocates for cloning, just as they have pushed for surrogacy and in vitro fertilization despite government refusals to fund such research’.¹⁹ This is another aspect of human cultural evolution of which Houellebecq has shown himself to be acutely aware: the tendency of the short-term, egotistical choices of individuals to generate unpredictable consequences for whole societies. *Les Particules élémentaires* showed how the desires of individuals for more sex, free from guilt and from domestic responsibilities, led, for many, to irreparable social isolation while threatening a

variety of demographic emergencies (see below). *La Possibilité d'une île* and *La Carte et le territoire* argue that the same generation's clamour for the 'right to die' – inspired by the questionable belief that, because suffering is unwanted, it must be undignified and unfair – may usher in a future in which the elderly find curtailed their very right to live. It is by no means far-fetched to suggest that millions of individual choices, facilitated by medical technology, can have population-level effects: Francis Fukuyama points to the example of sex ratios in contemporary Asia, dramatically altered by a cultural preference for boys and the ready availability of sonograms and legal abortions.²⁰ With the proliferation of ever more sophisticated genetic diagnostic technologies, it is possible to envisage the creation of a 'genetic overclass' among those wealthy enough to maximise the genetic potential of their offspring while eliminating all 'defects'.²¹ The real problem is that, in such a scenario, what constitutes a 'defect' would come to be defined by the class with the technological power to avoid it. Fukuyama offers the following thought experiment: assuming a genetic predisposition to homosexuality was located, and assuming gayness could be prevented by a drug taken during pregnancy, what proportion of pregnant women – necessarily heterosexual in the vast majority – would choose to take that drug, even as they protested that they had 'nothing against' gay people? What would be the consequences for the gay population, and for the presumably much smaller number of gay people remaining in that generation? To what extent could we say that humanity had been 'improved' by such genetic engineering?²² Chris Hables Gray, citing the work of Michael Gruber, wonders whether the posthuman future that our species is embarking upon may represent a new Age of Exploration, but reminds us that the last one – the period of colonial expansion – was not accomplished without massive programmes of genocide.²³

This may come across as somewhat alarmist, but it is worth pointing out that, even in the absence of advanced technologies of genetic modification, human cultural evolution over the past few decades has brought about some dramatic demographic shifts that may give rise to unpredictable and possibly violent consequences over the coming century. Everyone seems to agree that current rates of population growth are unsustainable given the finite resources of this planet, but there is little consensus as to how and when this growth may be reined in. John Gray seems to believe in a naturally occurring, species-level retrenchment. Humans, he writes, 'are like other animals in responding to stress. They react to scarcity and overcrowding by tuning down

the reproductive urge'.²⁴ But, as Chris Hables Gray's warning, above, implies, it could be that the competition for resources takes place at the expense of certain unfavoured groups in society. This too is an area in which Houellebecq has shown himself to be a shrewd observer. In his book *Our Posthuman Future*, Francis Fukuyama indicates a series of potential demographic time-bombs, all of which resonate richly with Houellebecq's novels. Fukuyama suggests that, given the ageing population in the developed world, and given the rapidly growing population of the developing world, together with its skewed sex ratio, by the middle of this century the planet may be divided into a northern hemisphere 'whose political tone is set by elderly women' and a South dominated by 'super-empowered angry young men'.²⁵ Now, although, as we have repeatedly suggested in this book, Houellebecq's residual sexism would make it difficult for him to imagine a feminine politics, it is true that the posthuman Utopias of both *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d'une île* have a partly feminine, or at least emasculated, character: 'Demain sera féminin' becomes the slogan of *Les Particules*'s new species (PE, 311; 374), while *La Possibilité*'s neo-humans observe a code of behaviour set down by the Supreme Sister. At the same time, for all the casual sexism of *Plateforme*, Houellebecq is aware that a significant proportion of the clientele for an expanded sex tourism would be drawn from the ranks of affluent, unattached, older western women, attracted to the virility of southern males. But the novel's conclusion implies that such a disposition of economic and sexual power could not long go unchallenged by the inhabitants of the South.

Secondly, Fukuyama suggests that, within the developed world, increased life expectancies and decreased birth rates will mean that 'political, social, and intellectual change will occur much more slowly',²⁶ potentially creating a situation in which a large, elderly, conservative majority stifles the ambitions of a small, young, radicalised minority. In this case, predicts Fukuyama, 'generational warfare will join class and ethnic conflict as a major dividing line in society'.²⁷ Not only that, but Fukuyama wonders whether 'in another fifty years, most developed societies may have become "post-sexual"'²⁸ since the majority of the population will be past their prime reproductive years. To what extent will a society continue to allow its media, its clothing industry and its cultural values to be defined by the image of twenty-year-olds when such people constitute only a tiny minority of the population? Could it be that the post-sexual Utopias of *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d'une île* are merely fictional exaggerations of a reality that awaits us,

not within the body of our posthuman successor, but in our own ageing body politic?

Finally, Fukuyama notes that one of the consequences of the uneven sex ratios in Asia is that, before long, some 20 per cent of China's marriage-age men will be unable to find a partner. As Fukuyama comments, 'It is hard to imagine a better formula for trouble, given the propensity of unattached young males to be involved in activities like risk-taking, rebellion and crime'.²⁹ We know, from the horrific evocations of male adolescence in *Les Particules élémentaires*, how destructive Houellebecq considers male sexuality to be when deprived of an outlet. His early work – *Les Particules* and *Extension* – insisted upon the criminal tendencies encouraged by sexual frustration in single men. Perhaps, far from the shocking, amoral provocations they have sometimes been portrayed as in the media, we will one day come to see Houellebecq's books – like other novels of anticipation such as *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – as rather tame and almost comforting visions compared to the reality that awaits us.

Notes

Introduction

1 See, for instance, Denis Demonpion, *Houellebecq non autorisé: Enquête sur un phénomène* (Paris: Maren Sell Éditeurs, 2005), pp. 12–13.

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 élémentaires*, *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.

6 Pierre Jourde, *La Littérature sans estomac* (Paris: L'Esprit des péninsules, 2002), p. 219.

- 7 Demonpion, *Houellebecq non autorisé*, p. 85.
- 8 Bardolle, *La Littérature à vif*, p. 26.
- 9 Claire Cros, *Ci-gît Paris (L'Impossibilité d'un monde): Pamphlet d'anticipation* (Paris: Éditions Michalon, 2005).
- 10 'balding, nothing much to look at, you might even say ugly', Jean-François Patricola, *Michel Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente* (Paris: Éditions Écriture, 2005), p. 14.
- 11 'a writer is always unhappy', *ibid.*, p. 15.
- 12 Cros, *Ci-gît Paris*, p. 90.
- 13 Bardolle, *La Littérature à vif*, p. 48.
- 14 Patricola, *Michel Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente*, p. 19.
- 15 Bruno Viard, *Houellebecq au scanner: La faute à mai 68* (Nice: Les Éditions Ovidia, 2008), p. 77.
- 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.
- 18 For a detailed discussion of the various *affaires*, and their context within the French literary sphere, see Ruth Cruickshank, 'Michel Houellebecq: Ideological Challenge and Precipitating Crisis', *Fin de millénaire French Fiction: The Aesthetics of Crisis* (Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 114–67.
- 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.
- 21 Lucie Ceccaldi, *L'Innocente* (Paris: Scali, 2008).
- 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.
- 26 Michel Waldberg, *La Parole putanisée* (Paris: La Différence, 2002), p. 30.
- 27 Jourde, *La Littérature sans estomac*, p. 223.
- 28 Demonpion, *Houellebecq non autorisé*, pp. 327–8.
- 29 Dominique Noguez, *Houellebecq, en fait* (Paris: Fayard, 2003).
- 30 Éric Naulleau, *Au secours, Houellebecq revient! Rentrée littéraire: par ici la sortie...* (Paris: Chifflet & Cie, 2005).
- 31 Cros, *Ci-gît 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.

- 34 Patricola, *Michel Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente*, p. 102.
 35 Noguez, *Houellebecq, en fait*, pp. 97–154.
 36 Eugene Thacker, ‘Data Made Flesh: Biotechnology and the Discourse of the Posthuman’, *Cultural Critique* 53 (2003), pp. 72–97 (p. 75).
 37 Neil Badmington, ‘Theorizing Posthumanism’, *Cultural Critique* 53 (2003), pp. 10–27 (p. 11).
 38 Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *La Fin de l’exception humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).
 39 Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. xv.
 40 *Ibid.*, p. 47.
 41 *Ibid.*, p. xxv.
 42 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
 43 ‘A game of specialists’ (*Po*, 128).

Chapter One

1 ‘almost the sole theme of his narratives’, Sabine van Wesemael, ‘Le Freudisme de Michel Houellebecq: *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, une histoire de maladie’, *CRIN* 43 (2004), pp. 117–26 (p. 118).

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 common-sense 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.

3 Murielle Lucie Clément, ‘Michel Houellebecq: Érotisme et pornographie’, *CRIN* 43 (2004), pp. 99–115 (pp. 99–100).

4 Franc Schuerewegen, ‘Scènes de cul’, *CRIN* 43 (2004), pp. 91–8 (p. 92).

5 Victoria Best and Martin Crowley, *The New Pornographies: Explicit Sex in Recent French Fiction and Film* (Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 192.

6 Douglas Morrey, ‘Michel Houellebecq and the International Sexual

Economy', *Portal: Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 1.1 (2004): <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/portal/article/viewArticle/44/0>.

7 Best and Crowley, *The New Pornographies*, p. 181.

8 Clément, 'Michel Houellebecq: Érotisme et pornographie', p. 114.

9 Schuerewegen, 'Scènes de cul', p. 93.

10 Julian Barnes, 'Haine et hédonisme: L'art insolent de Michel Houellebecq', *Les Inrockuptibles*, special issue *Houellebecq* (2005), pp. 30–5 (p. 33).

11 Michel Houellebecq, 'En toutes lettres', *Les Inrockuptibles*, special issue *Houellebecq* (2005), pp. 10–14 (p. 13).

12 Charles Taylor, 'The Sexual Bomb Thrower', *Salon.com*, 2 August 2003: <http://dir.salon.com/story/books/feature/2003/08/02/platform/index.html>.

13 Mads Anders Baggesgaard, 'Le Corps en vue – trois images du corps chez Michel Houellebecq', in Murielle Lucie Clément and Sabine van Wesemael (eds), *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 241–52.

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

15 Best and Crowley, *The New Pornographies*, p. 186.

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 constraints of ordinary morality, should turn their attentions to the wider pleasures of cruelty’ (PE, 211; 252).

29 Sheila Jeffreys, *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution* (London: Women’s Press, 1990), p. 93.

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, 60; 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.

39 Jean-Claude Guillebaud, *La Tyrannie du plaisir* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), p. 137.

40 David Fontaine, *No Sex Last Year: La vie sans sexe* (Paris: Les Petits Matins/Arte Éditions, 2006), pp. 15–16.

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

42 Virginie Despentes, *King Kong Théorie* (Paris: Grasset, 2006), p. 19.

43 David G. Blanchflower and Andrew J. Oswald, 'Money, Sex and Happiness: An Empirical Study', *Scandinavian Journal of Economics* 106.3 (2004), pp. 393–415 (p. 393).

44 Nathalie Dumas, 'Lutte à 99F: La vie sexuelle selon Michel H. et son extension à Frédéric B.', in Clément and van Wesemael, *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, pp. 215–25 (pp. 218–19).

45 ‘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, 76/12, 41/RV, 52).

46 Jeffrey Weeks, *The World We Have Won: The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 124–5.

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

48 *Ibid.*, pp. 152–3.

49 Jeffreys, *Anticlimax*, p. 96.

50 Guillebaud, *La Tyrannie du plaisir*, p. 136.

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

52 Jean Claude Bologne, *Histoire du célibat et des célibataires* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), pp. 333–4.

53 Guillebaud, *La Tyrannie du plaisir*, p. 424.

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).

59 Guillebaud, *La Tyrannie du plaisir*, p. 388.

60 A. Rochelle Mabry, ‘About a Girl: Female Subjectivity and Sexuality in Contemporary “Chick” Culture’, in Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (eds), *Chick Lit: The New Women’s Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 191–206 (p. 194).

61 *Ibid.*, p. 204.

62 Bologne, *Histoire du célibat*, p. 353.

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.

66 Liam McNamara, 'Michel Houellebecq and the Male Novel of Ressentiment', *Journal of Mundane Behavior* 3.1 (2002): www.mundanebehavior.org/issues/v3n1/mcnamara.htm.

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).

70 Douglas Morrey, 'Sex and the Single Male: Houellebecq, Feminism and Hegemonic Masculinity', *Yale French Studies* 116/117 (2009), pp. 141–52.

71 R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), p. 77.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

73 Compare the opening lines of the poem 'L'amour, l'amour': 'Dans un ciné 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).

75 In Catherine Argand, 'Michel Houellebecq', *Lire* (September 1998).

76 See Bertrand Leclair and Marc Weitzmann, 'Le Désir liquidé', *Les Inrockuptibles*, special issue *Houellebecq* (2005), pp. 56–62 (p. 56).

77 Quoted in Gavin Bowd, 'Michel Houellebecq and the Pursuit of Happiness', *Nottingham French Studies* 41.1 (2002), pp. 28–39 (p. 34).

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 pangs 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 paroxysmic 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).

85 Bologne, *Histoire du célibat*, p. 334.

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’, Despentès, *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).

93 Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), pp. 193–4.

94 Sheila Jeffreys, *Unpacking Queer Politics: A Lesbian Feminist Perspective* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p. 65.

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,

Ci-gît Paris (L'impossibilité d'un monde): Pamphlet d'anticipation (Paris: Éditions Michalon, 2005), p. 50.

104 van Wesemael, 'Le Freudisme de Michel Houellebecq', p. 117.

105 *Ibid.*, p. 119. See also van Wesemael, 'La Peur de l'émasculatation', in Clément and van Wesemael, *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, pp. 169–83 (p. 176).

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).

110 Martin Robitaille, 'Houellebecq ou l'extension d'un monde étrange', *Tangence* 76 (2004), pp. 87–103.

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.

112 Dominique Noguez, *Houellebecq, en fait* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), p. 97.

113 Best and Crowley, *The New Pornographies*, p. 190.

114 'When it comes to form, don't hesitate to contradict yourself. Branch out, change direction as often as necessary' (*RV*, 16).

115 Christian Monnin, 'Le Roman comme accélérateur de particules: Sur *Les Particules élémentaires* de Michel Houellebecq', *Liberté* 242 (1999), pp. 11–28.

116 Best and Crowley, *The New Pornographies*, p. 185.

117 Marc Weitzmann, 'L'Arpenteur', *Les Inrockuptibles*, special issue *Houellebecq* (2005), pp. 16–19 (p. 18).

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.

121 Noguez, *Houellebecq, en fait*, pp. 105–7.

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).

124 ‘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).

125 Marc Weitzmann, ‘*Rester vivant, méthode; La Poursuite du bonheur*’, *Les Inrockuptibles*, special issue *Houellebecq*, pp. 45–6 (p. 46) (first published in *Les Inrockuptibles* in June 1997).

126 ‘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).

127 Roger Célestin, ‘Du style, du plat, de Proust et de Houellebecq’ and Olivier Bessard-Banquy, ‘Le Degré zero de l’écriture selon Houellebecq’, both in Clément and van Wesemael, *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, pp. 345–56 (p. 350) and pp. 357–65 (p. 357).

128 Josyane Savigneau, ‘Houellebecq et l’Occident’, *Le Monde*, 30 August 2001.

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

130 ‘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).

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

132 Noguez, *Houellebecq, en fait*, pp. 109–10.

133 ‘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.

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

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

136 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.

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

138 ‘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).

139 ‘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).

140 ‘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).

141 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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

150 ‘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.

151 Best and Crowley, *The New Pornographies*, p. 181.

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

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

154 ‘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’.

155 Best and Crowley, *The New Pornographies*, p. 191.

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

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.

161 Korthals Altes, ‘Persuasion et ambiguïté’, p. 39.

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).

174 Robert Dion, ‘Faire la bête: Les fictions animalières dans *Extension du domaine de la lutte*’, *CRIN* 43 (2004), pp. 55–66 (p. 59).

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).

182 Jack L. Abecassis, ‘The Eclipse of Desire: L’Affaire Houellebecq’, *Modern Language Notes* 115 (2000), pp. 801–26 (p. 804).

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).

187 Best and Crowley, *The New Pornographies*, p. 182.

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'.

195 Marc Weitzmann, '*Les Particules élémentaires*', *Les Inrockuptibles*, special issue *Houellebecq* (2005), pp. 63–5 (p. 63) (first published in *Les Inrockuptibles*, August 1998).

196 'Long before the phrase became fashionable, my company developed an authentic *entreprise 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 IGRFs 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).

203 Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *Le Nouvel Esprit du capitalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

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.

205 Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 6–7.

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' (*I*, 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).

228 Carole Sweeney, “‘And yet some free time remains...’: Post-Fordism and Writing in Michel Houellebecq’s *Whatever*”, *Journal of Modern Literature* 33.4 (2010), pp. 41–56 (p. 48).

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).

232 Weitzmann, ‘*Les Particules élémentaires*’, p. 64.

233 Weitzmann, ‘*L’Arpenteur*’, pp. 18–19.

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 Ovidia, 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).

240 Guillebaud, *La Tyrannie du plaisir*, p. 9.

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).

242 Guillebaud, *La Tyrannie du plaisir*, p. 473.

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).

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 révoltait. / 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).

253 Bologne, *Histoire du célibat*, p. 371.

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.

256 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie: L’Anti-Œdipe* (Paris: Minuit, 1972–3).

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' (I, 80/12, 45/RV, 55).

266 Boltanski and Chiapello, *Le Nouvel Esprit du capitalisme*, pp. 570–1. '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' (I, 41/12, 57).

268 'the only superiority I recognise is that of goodness' (I, 41/12, 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).

272 See Leclair and Weitzmann, 'Le Désir liquidé', p. 61.

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

274 Luis de Miranda, 'Quand Bourdieu et Houellebecq nous annoncent la femme', *Chronic'art* (May 1998). Patricola links this deification of women to Houellebecq's upbringing, raised by his grandmother rather than his mother: this provides an image of pure maternal self-sacrifice without being tainted by female sexuality. *Michel Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente*, p. 207.

275 Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, p. 20.

276 *Ibid.*, p. 170.

277 See Argand, 'Michel Houellebecq'.

278 Weitzmann, 'Les Particules élémentaires', p. 63.

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

280 ‘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’, Despentès, *King Kong Théorie*, pp. 155–6.

Chapter two

1 Pierre Varrod, ‘Michel Houellebecq: *Plateforme* pour l’échange des misères mondiales,’ *Esprit* (November 2001), pp. 96–117.

2 David Lehardy Sweet, ‘Absentminded Prolepsis: Global Slackers Before the Age of Terror in Alex Garland’s *The Beach* and Michel Houellebecq’s *Plateforme*’, *Comparative Literature* 59.2 (2007), pp. 158–76 (p. 172).

3 Douglas Morrey, ‘Michel Houellebecq and the International Sexual Economy’, *Portal: Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 1.1 (2004): <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/portal/article/viewArticle/44/o>.

4 Varrod, ‘Michel Houellebecq: *Plateforme* pour l’échange des misères mondiales’, pp. 96–7.

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’).

14 Varrod, ‘Michel Houellebecq: *Plateforme* pour l’échange des misères mondiales’, p. 109.

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

complete control over him and determines his behaviour’, Benjamin Verpoort, ‘Voyage au bout de l’Europe: *Lanzarote* de Michel Houellebecq’, in Murielle Lucie Clément and Sabine van Wesemael (eds), *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 301–144 (p. 311). Verpoort misspells ‘loser’ as ‘looser’, an error that recurs with almost comical frequency in contemporary French culture.

16 Sweet, ‘Absentminded Prolepsis’.

17 ‘I realize that I’m not alone in being *depressionist* – our whole era is’ (*EP*, 67; 63, original emphasis).

18 Dean McCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 35.

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).

22 Aedín Ní Loingsigh, ‘Tourist Traps: Confounding Expectations in Michel Houellebecq’s *Plateforme*’, *French Cultural Studies* 16.1 (2005), pp. 73–90 (p. 77).

23 Maud Granger Remy, ‘Le Tourisme est un posthumanisme: Autour de *Plateforme*’, in Clément and van Wesemael, *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, pp. 277–86 (pp. 279–80).

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).

27 Ní Loingsigh, ‘Tourist Traps’, pp. 78–9.

28 MacCannell, *The Tourist*, p. 40.

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).

33 Sweet, 'Absentminded Prolepsis', p. 167.

34 MacCannell, *The Tourist*, p. 101.

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').

36 Ni Loingsigh, 'Tourist Traps', p. 80.

37 Ryan Bishop and Lilian S. Robinson, *Night Market: Sexual Cultures and the Thai Economic Miracle* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), p. 91.

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.

39 MacCannell, *The Tourist*, p. 99.

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.

42 MacCannell, *The Tourist*, p. 155.

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).

46 Bishop and Robinson, *Night Market*, pp. 9–10.

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

48 Morrey, 'Michel Houellebecq and the International Sexual Economy', p. 7.

49 As Françoise Grauby remarks in 'La Vie en noir: Le discours célibataire dans *Plateforme* de Michel Houellebecq (2001)', *New Zealand Journal of French Studies* 24.2 (2003), pp. 29–42 (p. 32).

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 suggests 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.

51 Sweet, 'Absentminded Prolepsis', p. 161.

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

53 Varrod, 'Michel Houellebecq: *Plateforme* pour l'échange des misères mondiales', p. 117.

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.

58 As Sweet points out, 'Absentminded Prolepsis', p. 173.

59 See Sweet, 'Absentminded Prolepsis', p. 166 and Bishop and Robinson, *Night Market*, p. 8.

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.

67 MacCannell, *The Tourist*, p. 163.

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).

72 Martin Ryle, ‘Surplus Consciousness: Houellebecq’s Novels of Ideas’, *Radical Philosophy* 126 (2004), pp. 23–32 (p. 30).

73 Ni Loingsigh, ‘Tourist Traps’, p. 85.

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).

77 Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France*, pp. 103–4.

78 See Ruth Cruickshank, *Fin de millénaire French Fiction: The Aesthetics of Crisis* (Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 118.

79 ‘Respect has become compulsory, even for the most immoral and stupid of cultures’ (*I2*, 193). We can see, here, the proximity of Houellebecq’s position to that of Christopher Lasch, cited at n. 38, above.

80 Ryle, ‘Surplus Consciousness’, p. 29.

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).

85 Ni Loingsigh, ‘Tourist Traps’, p. 75.

86 ‘the peremptory tone that he happily employs in proffering the most outlandish statements’, Christian Monnin, ‘*Lanzarote: Rencontre du deuxième type. Étude d’un texte “intermédiaire” de Michel Houellebecq*’, *CRIN* 43 (2004), pp. 81–90 (pp. 83–4).

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

88 Ryle, ‘Surplus Consciousness’, p. 24.

89 Sweet, ‘Absentminded Prolepsis’, p. 174.

90 Ní Loingsigh, ‘Tourist Traps’, p. 86.

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).

95 Varrod, ‘Michel Houellebecq: *Plateforme* pour l’échange des misères mondiales’, p. 112.

96 Ní Loingsigh, ‘Tourist Traps’, p. 74.

97 Marc Weitzmann, ‘Orgasmes inc.’, *Les Inrockuptibles*, special issue *Houellebecq* (2005), pp. 74–8 (p. 78).

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).

107 Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, trans. William Weaver (London: Picador, 1987), pp. 1–58.

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).

112 Dominique Méda, *Le Travail: Une valeur en voie de disparition?* (Paris: Flammarion, Champs Essais, 2010 [1995]).

113 *Ibid.*, p. 104.

114 William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Selected Writings and Designs* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 263.

115 Julian Stallabrass, *Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 2.

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.

119 Stallabrass, *Contemporary Art*, p. 7.

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).

128 Méda, *Le Travail*, p. 164.

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).

140 ‘portraits of the artist as an old man rarely avoid the pitfalls of self-indulgence, but this very weakness, because it betrays their anxiety, makes them touching’, Philippe Gasparini, *Est-il je? Roman autobiographique et autofiction* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), pp. 281–2.

141 ‘a sort of Sartre of the 2010s’ (CT, 126; 83).

142 Gasparini, *Est-il je?*, p. 12.

143 Ibid., pp. 29–30.

144 Ibid., pp. 235–8.

145 Ibid., pp. 238–44.

146 Michel Beaujour, *Miroirs d’encre: Rhétorique de l’autportrait* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), pp. 8–9.

147 Ibid., p. 13.

148 Ibid., p. 23.

149 Ibid., pp. 13–14.

150 Philippe Djian, *Vers chez les blancs* (Paris: Gallimard Folio, 2010 [2000]), p. 197.

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).

160 Camille Gévaudan, ‘Houellebecq est-il libre?’, *Libération*, 2 December 2010.

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

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

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

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

165 ‘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.

166 ‘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_no2/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).

29 ‘the preferred subjects of the most powerful current of contemporary European literature’, Nancy Huston, *Professeurs de désespoir* (Paris: Babel, 2005), p. 287.

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).

35 Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 2004 [1850]), p. 42.

- 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.
- 42 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge University Press, 1997 [1874]), p. 135.
- 43 Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*, p. 41.
- 44 Ibid., pp. 53–4.
- 45 Julian Young, *Schopenhauer* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 212.
- 46 Ibid., p. 211.
- 47 Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*, p. 51.
- 48 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1969 [1818]), pp. 113–14.
- 49 Ibid., p. 118.
- 50 Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*, p. 76.
- 51 Ibid., p. 64.
- 52 Walter Wagner, ‘Le Bonheur du néant: Une lecture schopenhauerienne de Houellebecq’, in Clément and van Wesemael, *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, pp. 109–22 (p. 115).
- 53 Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 157.
- 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).
- 59 Aurélien Bellanger, *Houellebecq écrivain romantique* (Paris: Éditions Léo Scheer, 2010), pp. 102–5.
- 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).

79 Douglas Morrey, 'Houellebecq, Genetics and Evolutionary Psychology', in Simon James and Nicholas Saul (eds), *The Evolution of Literature: Legacies of Darwin in European Cultures* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 227–38 (p. 231).

80 Keith Ansell Pearson, *Viroid Life: Perspectives on Nietzsche and the Transhuman Condition* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 28–9.

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.

85 Morrey, 'Houellebecq, Genetics and Evolutionary Psychology', pp. 234–5.

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.

88 Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 96.

89 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 344.

90 Grosz, *The Nick of Time*, p. 105.

91 Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 168.

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).

94 Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, pp. 42–3.

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).

100 Ben Jeffery, for instance, comments that the ‘neo-human paradise’ of *Les Particules élémentaires* ‘returns, ruined’ in *La Possibilité d’une île*. He describes the later novel’s clones as ‘half-alive’, in a state of ‘numbed isolation’, *Anti-Matter*, p. 59.

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.

102 Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, p. 190.

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.

105 See, for instance, Dorothy Nelkin and M. Susan Lindee, ‘Cloning in the Popular Imagination’, in Arlene Judith Klotzko (ed.), *The Cloning Sourcebook* (Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 83–93.

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.

110 Douglas Morrey, ‘Stop the World, or What’s Queer about Michel Houellebecq?’ , in James Day (ed.), *Queer Sexualities in French and Francophone Literature and Film* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 177–92 (p. 188).

111 Jean-François Lyotard, *Leçons sur l’analytique du sublime* (Paris: Galilée, 1991), p. 76. ‘[Thought] forbids itself the absolute, much as it still wants it. The consequence for thought is a kind of spasm’, Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 56.

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).

114 Stephen J. Hunt, *Alternative Religions: A Sociological Introduction* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 6.

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).

117 Vincent Lloyd, ‘Michel Houellebecq and the Theological Virtues’, *Literature and Theology* 23.1 (2009), pp. 84–98.

118 Fanny van Cuenebroeck, ‘Michel Houellebecq ou la possibilité d’une bible’, in Clément and van Wesemael, *Michel Houellebecq à la Une*, pp. 209–19.

119 Bellanger, *Houellebecq écrivain romantique*, p. 271.

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 Raélians 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).

129 Nelly Kapriélian, 'Plateforme', *Les Inrockuptibles*, special issue *Houellebecq* (2005), p. 79 [first published in *Les Inrockuptibles*, August 2001].

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' (*PI*, 279; 245).

133 'the unlimited prolongation of material life, that is to say the unlimited satisfaction of physical desires' (*PI*, 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).

139 'Happiness is identified rather with an *absence of being*', Françoise Grauby, 'La Vie en noir: Le discours célibataire dans *Plateforme* de Michel Houellebecq (2001)', *New Zealand Journal of French Studies* 24.2 (2003), pp. 29–42 (p. 35). Jeffery notes also that 'whenever Houellebecq describes happiness it is, almost invariably, as a blankness', *Anti-Matter*, p. 53.

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

Conclusion

1 Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1979), p. 15 n. 17.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

4 John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta, 2003), p. 3.

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.

7 John Dupré, *Humans and Other Animals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), p. 205.

8 Midgley, *Beast and Man*, pp. 40–1.

- 9 Dupré, *Humans and Other Animals*, p. 129.
- 10 Ibid., p. 149.
- 11 Ibid., p. 166.
- 12 Gray, *Straw Dogs*, pp. 5–6.
- 13 Ibid., p. xiii.
- 14 Ibid., p. 6.
- 15 Ibid., p. 14.
- 16 See Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (New York: Picador, 2002), p. 81.
- 17 On this point, see Chris Hables Gray, *Cyborg Citizen: Politics in the Posthuman Age* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 78.
- 18 Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future*, p. 177.
- 19 Gray, *Cyborg Citizen*, p. 124.
- 20 Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future*, p. 80.
- 21 Ibid., p. 157.
- 22 Ibid., pp. 39–40.
- 23 Gray, *Cyborg Citizen*, p. 127.
- 24 Gray, *Straw Dogs*, p. 11.
- 25 Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future*, p. 63.
- 26 Ibid., p. 66.
- 27 Ibid., p. 67.
- 28 Ibid., p. 70.
- 29 Ibid., p. 81.

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Index

- Ageing 1, 7, 13, 16, 20, 25, 41, 59,
62, 114, 122–3, 129–31, 135, 146,
149–50, 160–2
- Angot, Christine 102, 120
- Animals 8–11, 42, 52–3, 55, 60, 63,
76, 78, 125–6, 128, 131, 142, 149,
151–2, 154–6, 160
- Apocalypse Now* 105
- ‘Approches du désarroi’ 24, 47, 50,
52, 59, 121
- Arkansas* 105–6, 109
- Autofiction 2, 102–3
- Baldacci, David 67
- Balzac, Honoré de 105
- Barnes, Julian 15
- Barthes, Roland 103
- Baudelaire, Charles 79, 107
- Beckett, Samuel 120
- Beigbeder, Frédéric 97, 102–3, 108
- Bernhard, Thomas 120
- Blyton, Enid 41
- Bouvard et Pécuchet* 40
- Brave New World* 55, 162
- Bridget Jones’s Diary* 26
- Buddhism 109, 125, 148, 151
- Camus, Albert 1, 37
- Capitalism 32, 45, 48, 51, 54, 58–9,
62, 65, 67–9, 71, 74–5, 98–9,
111–12, 153, 158
- Carte et le territoire, La* 2, 6–7, 12,
63–5, 70, 87–113, 126, 131, 140,
147, 153, 160
- Céline, Louis-Ferdinand 1, 2, 17
- Christianity 8, 55, 142–3, 145, 151,
156
- Christie, Agatha 106
- Cioran, Emil 120
- Cloning 7–8, 12, 43, 56, 59, 64, 127,
129, 131, 134–9, 146–7, 159
- Comte, Auguste 78
- Conrad, Joseph 105
- Darwin, Charles 133
- Darwinism 8, 53, 57, 114, 152, 156–7
- Debord, Guy 54
- Deleuze, Gilles 58
- Depression 1, 9, 13, 32, 34, 36–7, 39,
45, 48–9, 52, 59, 69, 105, 121, 123,
126
- Derrida, Jacques 9
- Despentes, Virginie 23–4, 30, 62
- Desproges, Pierre 84
- Djian, Philippe 104
- Dobrovsky, Serge 102
- Eco, Umberto 91
- Ennemis publics* 2, 69, 87, 143, 145,
156–7
- Étranger, *L’* 37–8
- Euthanasia 25, 76, 130–1

- Evolution 9, 11, 13, 42, 57, 63, 76,
 114, 116, 125-6, 131-3, 136,
 149-50, 154, 156-60
 Evolutionary psychology 121
Extension du domaine de la lutte
 1, 11, 13, 15-18, 21-3, 25, 27, 29,
 32-4, 36-43, 45-8, 50-3, 56, 59,
 65-6, 104, 107, 112, 116-17, 121,
 123, 140-3, 147-8, 157, 162
- Feminism 11, 16, 19-21, 23, 30-1,
 34, 43
 Flaubert, Gustave 40-1, 108
 Fourier, Charles 94, 135
 Freud, Sigmund 11, 33
- Gates, Bill 52, 98
 Genetic modification 4, 7-8, 12,
 75-6, 99, 112, 136, 148, 152, 160
 Grisham, John 67
 Guattari, Félix 58
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich 54,
 94
 Heidegger, Martin 124
 Hirst, Damien 89, 96
*H. P. Lovecraft: Contre le monde,
 contre la vie* 12, 115-20, 149
 Humanism 8-10, 12, 45, 56, 62, 94,
 96, 126, 137-8, 149-51, 158
 Huston, Nancy 111, 120-1
 Huxley, Aldous 55
- Individualism 13, 55, 57-9, 62-4, 135,
 149-50, 153, 158
 Islam 4-5, 19, 43, 81-3, 143
- Jameson, Fredric 134-5, 137
 Jobs, Steve 98
- Kant, Immanuel 35, 124
 Keynes, John Maynard 110
 Koons, Jeff 89, 96
- Kundera, Milan 120
- Lamarckism 132, 157
Lanzarote 68, 70-1, 83-5, 143-4,
 146
 Leiris, Michel 103
 Lévy, Bernard-Henri 2, 156
 Liszt, Franz 109
 Locke, John 137
Lolita 126
 Lovecraft, Howard Phillips 1,
 114-21
 Lyotard, Jean-François 140
- Marx, Karl 53-4, 94
 Marxism 53, 81, 141
 Masculinity 27
 Masturbation 14, 25, 31, 51-2, 55
 Maupassant, Guy de 52
 May 1968 4
 Mérot, Pierre 105-6, 109
 Mitterrand, François 90
 Molecular biology 116
 Montaigne, Michel de 103
 More, Thomas 135
 Morris, William 94
- Nabakov, Vladimir 126
News from Nowhere 94
 Nietzsche, Friedrich 122, 125,
 132-3, 155
Nineteen Eighty-Four 162
 Noguez, Dominique 6, 34, 36-7, 40,
 42, 115
- Paedophilia 5, 14, 25, 29, 130
Particules élémentaires, Les 2-5,
 7-8, 11, 13-16, 18-23, 25,
 28-30, 32, 35-6, 38-9, 41-5,
 47-8, 51-2, 54-61, 65, 69, 74,
 76, 81, 93, 112, 115-16, 118, 124,
 126, 134, 140, 142, 147-8, 157-9,
 161-2

Perpendiculaire 4

Plateforme 2, 4–5, 12, 14–16, 19, 36–7, 40, 43, 63–86, 88, 90, 93, 107, 111–12, 117, 121, 130, 140, 145–8, 153–6, 161

Pornography 2, 10, 14–15, 22, 27–8, 31, 35, 39, 66, 74, 76, 85, 105

Possibilité d'une île, La 2, 3, 5–8, 12, 25, 39, 64, 69, 76, 93, 105, 107, 114, 116, 121–3, 125–47, 149–51, 153, 158–61

Posthumanism 8–10, 12–13, 34, 41, 43, 45, 56, 61, 63, 76, 93, 96, 99, 112, 114, 132, 135, 141, 147, 149–54, 158–62

Poursuite du bonheur, La 1, 11, 17

Prostitution 5, 15, 76–8, 80–1, 112, 130, 145, 148

Proust, Marcel 2, 52

Psychoanalysis 33, 116

Quantum mechanics 116

Questions pour un champion 86, 89, 106

Raëlism 144

Rawls, John 137

Renaissance 2, 41

Rester vivant 1, 12, 35, 37, 56, 114, 119–20, 122, 149

Rêveries du promeneur solitaire, Les 103

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques 90, 103, 135

Saint-Simon, Comte de (Claude Henri de Rouvroy) 135

Sartre, Jean-Paul 1, 102

Schopenhauer, Arthur 114, 121–5, 133, 149

Schumpeter, Joseph 110

Science fiction 7–12, 35, 59, 64, 93, 110, 112

Sex and the City 26

Sex tourism 4–5, 12, 19, 65–6, 68, 72, 74–9, 80–1, 112, 146, 161

Sexual revolution 19–22, 24, 81

Sens du combat, Le 2, 17, 37

Solanas, Valerie 21

Stendhal 37

Sublime, the 36, 139–41

Suicide 19, 25, 33, 39, 46, 119, 129–30, 132, 143, 151

Supermarkets 35–6, 46–7, 106, 121, 142

Swift, Jonathan 130

Tocqueville, Alexis de 94

Toussaint, Jean-Philippe 37

Utopia 8, 12, 41, 50, 55, 59, 62, 64–5, 75, 77, 81, 94, 104–6, 114, 118, 122, 134–5, 137–8, 143, 147, 150–1, 153, 161

Vers chez les blancs 104

Voyage au bout de la nuit 1

Wikipedia 110

Zola, Émile 2, 35

