Academia and Society: Reading Michel Houellebecq’s *Submission* as an Academic Novel

**Introduction**

Michel Houellebecq’s 2015 novel *Submission* is open to multiple interpretations that branch out in many different directions. One perspective is to read the novel as a satire on French society (Scurati; Brühwiler) that traces the disintegration of the traditional political body in the face of the challenges that France and the rest of Europe are currently forced to confront. As such, immigration, multiculturalism, the dissolution of the nation state, the vision of the European Union, French identity, ethnicity, and religion are among the topics raised in the novel. [[1]](#footnote-2)

*Submission* relates an alternative history of France where, at the 2022 presidential elections, the struggling Republican Party and the Socialists join forces with the Muslim Brotherhood party to defeat the radical right. This victory has egregious implications. While the newly elected president initially appears moderate and levelheaded, the Muslim theocracy he establishes ceases to represent the values of the secular state. It complicates French political life and challenges France’s traditional republican values. Women are banned from the workplace and required to wear face veils; all citizens receive free primary education, but secondary and university education is privatized; institutions become Islamized; polygamy and child marriage are legitimized. All of these events are woven into a plot narrated by François, a forty-something university professor who specializes in the writings of Joris-Karl Huysmans.

Read as a satire, *Submission* is faithful to the author’s signature postmodernist poetics of destabilization and deconstruction (Buchweitz). The novel’s structural framework relies on an apparent “constitutive ambivalence” (Novak-Lechevalier 154), in the sense that the novelistic techniques undermine the reader’s ability to grasp what the book’s central thesis might be. Is the speculative novel a scathing critique of reactionary Islam that borders on Islamophobia? Does it present a dystopian vision of France where the religion of Islam represents an attenuating force intended to redeem man’s relationship with God? Is it meant to deliver a stinging rebuke to the secular state? Does the text exploit fear of Muslims to drive the argument that France has lost its identity due to immigration and transnationalism? Does it convey misogynist nostalgia for outdated gender roles? Scholars have observed that the layers of irony engulfing the text make it impossible to extract the precise target of the novel’s critique (Morrey; Scurati).[[2]](#footnote-3) As Henry F. Smith points out, François’s proposition “je ne suis *pour* rien de tout, tu le sait bien” (Houellebecq 41) ‘you know I am not *for* anything’ (Stein 28, italics in the original)][[3]](#footnote-4) is indicative of the author’s nihilistic stance and narrative techniques (Smith, 182).[[4]](#footnote-5) In a recent open correspondence with Gilles Martin-Chauffier, Houellbecq directly addressed his refusal of and resistance to the interdictions and injunctions of contemporary culture:

“En somme, j’ai de mon mieux combattu les lois qui me paraissaient contraires à ma conception de la liberté individuelle. Ayant connu une époque où l’on n’interdisait pas assez (je n’ai jamais été ‘hostile à la censure sous toutes ses formes’), j’ai été insidieusement plongé dans une époque où l’on interdit trop (je ne comprends toujours pas, par exemple, ce qui justifie de proscrire l’expression d’opinions ‘islamophobes’)” (Houellebecq 2019) ‘In short, I did my best to combat laws that seemed to me to be contrary to my conception of personal liberty. Having known times when there were not enough restrictions (I’ve never been ‘opposed to all forms of censorship’), I’ve been insidiously plunged into a period where there is too much prohibition (I still don’t understand, for example, what justifies the prohibition of expressing ‘Islamophobic’ opinions).’[[5]](#footnote-6)

In *Submission*, black irony (Courteau, 84) and cynicism are used to unsettle the reader, spur resistance, counteract interpretation, and elicit awareness of incongruities. However, the most prominent structural device that prevents the reader from identifying a fixed satirical target in the novel is the narrative voice of François. As Douglas Morrey remarked, “the ironic treatment of Houellebecq’s narrator means that many of the apparent ideological positions voiced in the novel should be regarded with considerable caution” (Morrey 350). The reliability of the narrator is constantly brought into question,[[6]](#footnote-7) casting doubt on his propositions and undermining the stances he takes, since it is difficult to decipher the disposition of the implied author against which to measure that of the narrator. The unreliable François clearly violates many of today’s widely accepted cultural norms and values. He has transient sexual relationships with his female students, which generally last no longer than the academic year (with the exception of Myriam, to whom he grows attached). This flagrant, self-avowed abuse of power is either an “unwitting self-exposure or unintentional betrayal of personal shortcomings” (Nünning 100), an intentional provocation by engaging in unequivocally problematic conduct. By making the narrator ethically dubious, his reliability is undermined. In parallel, the credibility of French society is compromised in its readiness to abandon its liberal values and to sacrifice women’s rights in exchange for civil peace and prosperity. Furthermore, it will be revealed that this same liberal elite never did live up to its proclaimed respect for women in the first place.

Hence, as a satirical depiction of contemporary France, *Submission* intends to dismantle, unmask, and disturb (Scurati 170–171; Almeida; Blanchard), and the discrepancy between the events and the narrator creates an unstable form of tension between certainty and indeterminacy, making it difficult to pinpoint the target of this social critique. Nevertheless, if we shift our attention to the narrator in his capacity as a member of the academic community, the satire manifestly becomes focused, fixed, and stable: academia is the unambiguous object of ridicule, the very social phenomenon the reader is being warned against. If satire criticizes specific human behavior by portraying it as ridiculous, then, in this sense, the university is not an incidental setting but the object of an attack: the vices and whims characteristic of academic life are exposed, and the reader is shown how depravity mixes with intellect in the minds of academics and in their dealings with larger social issues.

In this article, I interpret *Submission* as an *academic novel* wherein French academia is the focus of the critique. The political intrigue in which François is embroiled and his colleagues’ reactions—or lack thereof—to the shocking events taking place outside the gates of academia serve as the background to a critique of the “bon à rien” (Houellebecq 1, cited from J. K. Huysmans *En route*) ‘good for nothing’ (Stein 1) intellectual elites who prove to be indifferent, inept, and disinterested in voicing an opinion. When they do speak out, it is only in the interests of their personal objectives (Rousseau 121; Michel; Knausgaard; Morrey 349).[[7]](#footnote-8) Houellebecq satirizes the academic sphere for being impaired by collective impracticality with regard to its fundamental societal mission and political role in times of social turmoil.

***Submission* as an Academic Novel**

The academic novel[[8]](#footnote-9) is a modern form of literary narrative set within the enclosed world of a college or university, often highlighting the follies of academic life. This type of writing maps the political and social developments of an academic world that “no longer shelters eccentrics of genius” (Showalter 117); it derides the unproductive, useless, or ineffectual character of the faculty, and the ways in which it is disconnected from reality and everyday existence beyond campus life as a whole. Established in British and American literature as a subgenre of contemporary fiction, the academic novel investigates ethical and philosophical questions endemic to the academic setting, and shifts of thematic emphasis have been seen over the years. Attentive to its time, it constantly represents the contemporary headlines of higher education, from class and political infighting to feminism, political correctness, identity politics, and multiculturalism (Showalter).

The narratives of academic novels are constructed around the “constant dialectic between competitiveness and idealism—or, scholarship as an end in itself and scholarship as a means to an end” (Showalter 4, citing Janice Rossen). In appearance, academic life seems safe and comfortable, a communal life rooted in individualism. A realm where teacher-researchers can take part in intellectual discourse with their colleagues, but at the same time they must compete against one another. And, since the quality of one’s research and one’s scholarly productivity do not necessarily guarantee professional success, this breeds unforgiving competition and interpersonal conflict, which is compounded by fundamental inequalities. Hence, the politics of exclusion, or the perpetual threat of being removed from the community, features profusely in academic novels, underpinned by the constant fear of failing to secure a tenured post or promotion (Womack 329-340; Showalter 3-5).

The authors of academic novels are often university professors themselves, but they may well be writers outside the academic fold; either way, major academic novels use the genre to explore matters that extend beyond the boundaries of the campus and the parody of the academic world (Womack; Showalter). They may challenge the relevance of theories developed and propagated by academics to address issues that “plague the world beyond the halls of the academy” (Womack 335), while questioning the university’s competence in engendering social change “when its most cherished principles evince little practical application” (Womack 333).

From the outset, *Submission* presents itself as an academic novel. The context of the events depicted is typical of the genre and foregrounded at the charged points of the beginning and end of the novel: the first chapter walks us through the milestones in François’s academic career from its inception, while in the last chapter he has the opportunity to rejuvenate his career at the Sorbonne after converting to Islam. The university serves as the primary locus of attention and intention, both geographically and conceptually, making the campus environment the novel’s milieu. Houellebecq touches upon several issues concerning the academic lifecycle*,* evoking classic themes of the academic novel. One of the issues addressed is academic professionalization, which leads to the faculty’s indifference to its student ‘customers’. The protagonist François is a faculty member who finds teaching purposeless. He lectures only one morning a week, and has little connection with his students; neither does he really mind whether or not they find his lectures interesting. One day, on his way out of class, he wonders “(en quoi les deux vierges en burqa pouvaient-elles être intéressées par Jean Lorrain, ce pédé dégoûtant, qui se proclamait lui-même *enfilanthrope* ? Leur pères étaient-ils au courant du contenu exact de leurs études? […])” (Houellebecq 35 [emphasis in the original]) ‘(what did those two virgins in burkas care about that revolting queen, that self-proclaimed analyst, Jean Lorrain? Did their fathers realize what they were reading in the name of literature?[…])’ (Stein 22). Even though he interacts with them only minimally, he still finds a way to complain about his doctoral students who bother him with “des questions oiseues” (Houellebecq 53) ‘their lazy questions’ (Stein 40)]; “c’était deux doctorants maigres et méchants” (Houellebecq 53) ‘they were bad students with bad attitudes’ (Stein 40)]. In his view, mandatory teaching and the professor’s duty to educate the next generation of students constituted a fall from the golden age of dissertation writing: “Mais tout cela était fini; ma jeunesse, plus généralement, était finie. Bientôt maintenant (et sans doute assez vite), j’allais m’engager dans un processus d’insertion professionnelle. Ce qui ne me réjouissait nullement.” (Houellebecq 16) ‘but that [dissertation writing] was all over now. My entire youth was over. Soon (very soon), I would have to see about entering the work-force. The prospect left me cold’ (Stein 7)].

The perpetual hunt for job security is another issue at stake. The fact that tenure and promotion necessitate constant decision-making is another theme satirized in the novel; such decisions have ethical implications, requiring the individual to carefully choose their allies and their subject of research. Some advance professionally by using flattery to their advantage rather than by meeting objective standards of excellence, as is the case with Steve; he is granted tenure even though “on pouvait se demander comment il avait accédé au statut de maître de conférences alors qu’il n’avait rien publié, dans aucune revue importante ni même de second plan, et qu’il n’était l’auteur que d’une vague thèse sur Rimbaud, *sujet bidon* par excellence” (Houellebecq 28 [italics in the original) ‘it was an open question how he’d been named a senior lecturer when he’d never published in an important journal, or even a minor one, and when all he’d written was a vague dissertation on Rimbaud, a *bogus topic* if ever there was one’ (Stein 17 [italics in the original]). In fact, he climbed the ladder thanks to his excellent sexual performance as Chantal Delouze’s (former university president) lover. All faculty members in the novel take part in this kind of wheeling and dealing, competing over academic positions with other academic superstars who are offered better contracts with outstanding salaries and benefits. The cumbersome process of writing and research is also addressed (as François puts it, “j'avançais sur l’établissement de l'appareil des notes mais j’étais toujours en panne pour la préface” (Houellebecq 274) ‘I made progress on the footnotes, but I got stuck working on the introduction’ (Stein 225), as well as the limited reading audience for scholarship in publications that go largely “under the radar” (Stein 91). *Submission* presents the ethical aspects of an academic career, against the backdrop of the financial and social issues that influence the current academia reality, namely global economic downturns and budgetary cuts, as well as growing social divides on campus, and the increasingly extreme character of identity politics and cancel culture.

Mostly, *Submission* weaves a representation of academic life with a depiction of the events unfolding outside the campus gates. By soaring above the confines of the campus, *Submission* offers an outlook on the connection between the intellectual world and social politics, interlacing internal academic politics with the radical political developments taking place outside. The two contexts are manifestly juxtaposed, and the novel concentrates on the nature of this connection. It offers a repetitive series of scenes that circumscribe, complicate, and reexamine the place of academia and its relation to political trends and upheavals. It thus raises the question of academic responsibility toward society, especially in times of crisis. Evidently, the novel’s ‘Republic of Science’ ignores political reality even when the latter encroaches upon its hallowed halls of learning. In *Submission*, the characters are far removed from the astonishing events taking place across France. The juxtaposition of what is happening within and outside the academy creates a sense of absurd disconnection. Accordingly, when the political turmoil can no longer be ignored, François draws a comparison between the students and their professors. He notices the attitude of his postgraduate students: “aussi amorphes et dépolitisés soient-ils, ils semblaient ce jour-là tendus, anxieux (Houellebecq 78) ‘even the most apathetic and apolitical looked tense, anxious’ (Stein 61), whereas his colleagues showed apathy:

j’étais par contre frappé par l’atonie de mes collègues. Pour eux il ne semblait y avoir aucun problème, ils ne se sentaient nullement concernés, ce qui ne faisait que confirmer ce que je pensais depuis des années : ceux qui parviennent à un statut d’enseignant universitaire n’imaginent même pas qu’une évolution politique puisse avoir le moindre effet sur leur carrière ; ils se sentent absolument intouchables. (Houellebecq 78-79)

I was equally struck by my colleagues’ lack of concern. They seemed completely unworried, as if none of this had anything to do with them. It only confirmed what I’d always thought – that, for all their education, university professors can’t even imagine political developments having any effect on their careers: they consider themselves untouchable. (Stein XX)

The comparison between the discerning students and the unperceptive professors is reinforced by the proposition cited above, where the narrator exposes parochial, sectarian motivations; not only are the professors indifferent and complacent about the political aftereffects of the situation, but their concerns are limited to their own egotistic world, and they prefer to ignore societal concerns altogether. Consequently, as Chantal Michel notes, “en temps de crise, mus par la peur, résignés ou apathiques, François et ses collègues ne songent qu’à leur survie et à leur intérêt et ils se contentent d’espérer le retour d’un monde sûr” (Michel XX) ‘in times of crisis, fear-driven, resigned or apathetic, François and his colleagues think only of their survival and their own interests, and they do little more than hope for the return of a safe world.’[[9]](#footnote-10)

As an academic novel, *Submission* reexamines the humanities’ responsibility and commitment to society, as well as their complex relationship with politics, both on- and off-campus. Thus, Houellebecq challenges his readers to question some of the basic concepts and premises that shape academia as it is today. Naturally, academia is susceptible to on- and off-campus politicization, since, as elucidated, it is an arena founded on high-stakes competition with colleagues striving for success in a fundamentally unequal space, where the quality of one’s scholarly output is not the sole thing that counts. Academics may take an overt political stance, or, conversely, abstain from politics by embracing their elevated status and purported disengagement from real life. In examining the role of academia, Houellebecq leads us in two different directions. On the one hand, over-involvement in politics has dire implications for research and education. On the other hand, under-involvement in political life, which amounts to the disengagement of the ivory tower from the teeming reality below it, has grave consequences both in terms of social irresponsibility and a negative return on government investment.

**Over-involvement**

 The flagrant politicization of academia is embodied by the intellectual who serves political interests or seeks promotion by associating with those with money and power. Such academics are “motivated less by faith and service than by ambition and the longing for power” (Showalter 119). François himself leans toward this propensity when he imagines his own path to promotion:

depuis quelques semaines on reparlait d’un projet vieux d’au moins quatre ou cinq ans concernant l’implantation d’une réplique de la Sorbonne à Dubaï (ou au Bahrein ? ou au Qatar ? je les confondais). Un projet similaire était à l’étude avec Oxford, l’ancienneté de nos deux universités avait dû séduire un pétromonarchie quelconque. Dans cette perspective, certainement prometteuse d’opportunités financières réelles pour un jeune maître de conférences, envisageait-il de se mettre sur les rangs en affichant de positions antisionistes ? Et pensait-il que j’avais intérêt à adopter la même attitude ? (Houellebecq 30-31)

Lately there had been more talk about a project, first proposed four or five years ago, to create a replica of the Sorbonne in Dubai (or was it Bahrain? Qatar? I always get them mixed up). Oxford had a similar plan in the works. Clearly the antiquity of our two universities had caught some petromonarch’s eye. If the project went through, there’d be real financial opportunities for a young lecturer like Steve. *Had he considered throwing his hat into the ring with a little anti-Zionist agitation? And did he think there might be anything in it for me*? (Stein 18-19, my italics).

Such opportunism is exemplified in *Submission*, chiefly by academics who take part in efforts to boycott Israel as a stepping stone to academic promotion and then promulgate the Islamic party’s concepts in writing and in action. The political career of François’s superior, newly appointed university president Prof. Rediger, is marked by direct involvement in politics: “Une recherche de deux minutes à peine m’apprit que Robert Rediger était célèbre pour ses positions propalestiniennes, et qu’il avait été l’un des principaux artisans du boycott des universitaires israéliens” (Houellebecq 37) ‘A two-minute search revealed that Robert Rediger was famously pro-Palestinian, and that he’d helped orchestrate the boycott against the Israelis’ (Stein 23).

As a reward for converting to Islam and propagating Islamic politics, he is not only granted a professorship butalso appointed president of the universityafter the Sorbonne is purchased by the Saudi government. Then,following the elections, he is compensated for his loyalty by being appointed Minister of Higher Education: “Il venait d’être nommé à la fonction de secrétaire d’état aux Universités, recréée pour l’occasion” (Houellebecq 270) ‘Rediger had been named secretary of universities—*a post they’d revived just for him*’ (Stein 221 [my emphasis]). Rediger’s political bias goes hand in hand with inaccuracies in his research. As he himself admits to François, “J’ai obtenu mon doctorat; mais ce n’était pas une très bonne thèse. Bien inférieure à la vôtre, en tout cas. Disons que je sollicitais un peu les textes, comme on dit” (Houellebecq 245) ‘they gave me my doctorate, but it wasn’t much of a thesis.Nothing like yours. Anyway.My reading [of Nietzsche] was, as they say, selective’ (Stein 200). Once appointed university president, Rediger declares that in order to work at the Sorbonne, one must convert to Islam. To protect their personal interests, faculty members are forced to comply and thus proceed toward the dismantling of the secular republic, which enables the Islamic republic to tighten its control over French culture.

Money, in this case Saudi money, not only dictates a specific lifestyle but has significant bearing on research and teaching. The quality of academic research drops, and the professors disengage from their students and become indifferent to the quality of education. When Rediger offers François a teaching post, he tells him he had wanted to recruit “enseignants réellement respectés, bénéficiant d’une vraie stature internationale” (Houellebecq 248) ‘truly eminent teachers, who have real international reputations’ (Stein 202). He goes on to admit his failure to enlist such talent and offers François plenty of money. He concedes that a teaching position at the Sorbonne is no longer that prestigious but makes a promise: “je peux au moins m’engager, m’engager à titre personnel, à ce que votre véritable travail ne soit pas perturbé. Vous n’auriez à assurer que des cours facile […] l’assistance aux doctorants […] vous serait épargnéé” (Houellebecq 248) ‘nothing would be allowed to interfere with your real work….No hard classes…. No dissertations to advise’ (Stein XXX). In other words, Rediger wants François to serve as the crumbling university’s window dressing, while he liberates him completely from his obligation to the students, thus relieving him of his responsibility to society. Consequently, responsible scientific work is left to his colleagues (with limited readership) while ideas that shape society are disseminated and popularized by less responsible academics, and Rediger’s book on Islam *Dix questions sur l'islam* is evidence of this.

**Under-involvement**

The under-involvement or depoliticization of academia is the most heavily satirized contemporary trend in *Submission* in the sense of its seclusion in its ivory tower and separation from a seething reality below. François openly admits that politics and history do not interest him: “je me sentais aussi politisé qu’une serviette de toilette” (Houellebecq 50) ‘I was about as political as a bath towel’ (Stein 37). He merely observes events. He does wonder whether it was really over for the two parties that had dominated French political life since the Fifth Republic. However, he never takes a stand either way. This figure who knows how to assign meaning to texts and make connections between authors, periods, and ideas, demonstrates impatience and impotence in the face of the concrete collapse of the democratic system. He views himself as a spectator rather than a participant in the proceedings:

J’aimais depuis toujours les soirées d’élection présidentielle ; je crois même qu’à l’exception des finales de coupe du football, c’était mon programme télévisé favori. Le suspense était évidemment moins fort, les élections obéissent à ce dispositif singulier d’une histoire dont le dénouement est connu dès la première minute ; mais l’extrême diversité des intervenants )les politologues, les éditorialistes politiques ‘de premier plan’, les foules militants en liesse ou en pleurs au siège de leurs partis… les hommes politiques enfin, leurs déclarations à chaud, réfléchies ou émues), l’excitation générale des participants donnaient vraiment cette impression si rare, si précieuse, si télégénique, de vivre un moment historique en direct. (Houellebecq 74)

I’d always loved election night. I’d go so far as to say it’s my favorite TV show, after the World Cup finals. Obviously there was less suspense in elections, since, according to their peculiar narrative structure, you knew from the first minutes how they would end, but the wide range of actors (the political scientists, the pundits, the crowds of supporters cheering or in tears at their party headquarters … and the politicians, in the heat of the moment, with their thoughtful or passionate declarations) and the general excitement of the participants really gave you the feeling, so rare, so precious, so telegenic, that history was coming to you live. (Stein 58)

In this fragment, François employs the tools of the literary critic to relate to election night; but instead of paying attention to the content and the weighty issues at stake, for him, the elections are a genre of television programming with a choice narrative structure. He analyzes the generic techniques used to produce the impression of a historic moment, as if all of it is nothing more than the demonstration of pragmatic poetics. As a university professor, François preserves the inalienable assets of an expansive French culture but displays a lack of interest in reality. Hence, he and his ilk are irrelevant to political life.

In his efforts to avoid getting involved or contaminated by reality, he goes so far as to flee to the provinces. His profound apathy is displayed in a scene that inverts moral hierarchies: hungry and running out of gas, François stops at a gas station to refill his tank and finds that it has been looted. He discovers the cashier lying on the floor in a pool of blood: “Je revins vers la boutique, enjambai le cadavre à contrecœur … Après une brève hésitation, je pris dans les rayonnages un sandwich thon crudités, une bière sans alcool et le guide Michelin” (Houellebecq 129) ‘I went back into the shop and stepped reluctantly over the body… After a moment’s hesitation, I helped myself to a tuna-vegetable sandwich from the sandwich shelf, a non-alcoholic beer, and a Michelin guide’ (Stein 104). He then gets back into his car and continues on his way. This matter-of-fact description conveys the protagonist’s moral indifference: François skips lightly over a human corpse to procure a sandwich, and we can only assume that his hesitation is due to his inability to pay because there is neither a cash register nor a cashier to take his money. The corpse, on the other hand, fails to solicit any further attention or action. And François is not alone in his apathy:

Pendant plusieurs années, et sans doute même plusieurs dizaines d’années, Le Monde, ainsi plus généralement que tous les journaux de centre-gauche, c’est-à-dire en réalité tous les journaux, avaient régulièrement dénoncé les ‘Cassandres’ qui prévoyaient une guerre civile entre les immigrés musulmans et les populations autochtones d’Europe occidentale. Comme me l’avait expliqué un de mes collègues qui enseignait la littérature grecque, cette utilisation du mythe de Cassandre était au fond curieuse […] En somme, Cassandre offrait l’exemple de prédictions pessimistes constamment réalisées, et il semblait bien, à voir les faits ; que les journalistes de contre-gauche ne fassent que répéter l’aveuglement des Troyens. (Houellebecq 55-56)

For years now, probably decades, *Le Monde* and all the other center-left newspapers… had been denouncing the “Cassandras” who predicted civil war between Muslim immigrants and the indigenous populations of Western Europe. The way it was explained to me by my colleague in the classics department, this was an odd allusion to make […] In short, Cassandra offered an example of worst-case predictions that always came true. In hindsight, the journalists of the center-left seemed only to have repeated the blindness of the Trojans. (Stein 41–42)

The French newspapers discount the prophets of doom as “Cassandras”, preferring to overlook and ignore tumultuous social tensions. Yet François’scolleagues only address this issue insofar as it relates to their expertise. One of them, an expert in Greek mythology, contends that the allusion to the myth is inaccurate and therefore impertinent. Such academics prove unable to relate to the context in which the myth is being used—the reference is to the combustive external events being witnessed as the Muslim party seizes control of the state. Instead, they split hairs over the modern use of the mythological figure’s name. The professors’ understanding of the situation remains abstract, and they do not apply their knowledge to draw conclusions about reality, staunchly refusing to be political in the most practical sense of the term. It is worthwhile noting that François entertains these musings on his way to a party held at the *Museum of Romantic Life*, ironically emphasizing academia’s disconnection from immediate reality and a preference to immerse themselves in more comfortable epochs. In their indifference, suggests Houellebecq, they become party to the usurpation and inversion of everything France stands for.

 In another scene, François acknowledges that the political events happening across France are significant enough to make it worth the effort to watch a television debate between the election candidates. He intends to watch the debate while eating a microwave dinner. Again, in an inversion of hierarchies, the fateful and the serious are juxtaposed with the trivial and the banal, the latter eventually prevailing; even though François has decided that it is important to watch the debate, he gets caught up in the problem of how to heat his dinner after his microwave malfunctions and misses the televised event altogether.

Thus, through either over-involvement or under-involvement in politics, academia, and the humanities, in particular, betray society. Society relies on academia for knowledge production. The university fails in its duty if it becomes too deeply enmeshed in or completely indifferent to politics. The French academic, as portrayed in the novel, however, feels no obligation to anything, not even to social democracy, which is on the verge of collapse. The very purpose of university studies is parodied *ad absurdum* in the following extract, where François disavows *a priori* the relevance of knowledge acquired in the humanities:

Les études universitaires dans le domaine des lettres ne conduisent comme on le sait à peu près à rien, sinon pour les étudiants les plus doués à une carrière d’enseignement universitaire dans le domaine des lettres – on a en somme la situation plutôt cocasse d’un système n’ayant d’autre objectif que sa propre reproduction […] Elles ne sont cependant pas nuisibles, et peuvent même présenter une utilité marginale. Une jeune fille postulant à un emploi de vendeuse chez Céline ou chez Hermès devra naturellement, et en tout premier lieu, soigner sa présentation ; mais une licence ou un mastère de lettres modernes pourra constituer un atout secondaire garantissant à l’employeur, à défaut de compétences utilisables, une certaine agilité intellectuelle laissant présager la possibilité d’une évolution de carrière – la littérature, en outre, étant depuis toujours assortie d’une connotation positive dans le domaine de l’industrie du luxe. (Houellebecq 17)

The academic study of literature leads basically nowhere, as well all know. Unless you happen to be an especially gifted student, in which case it prepares you for a career teaching the academic study of literature – it is, in other words, a rather farcical system that exists solely to replicate itself […] Still, it’s harmless, and can even have a certain marginal value. A young woman applying for a sales job at Céline or Hermès should naturally attend to her appearance above all; but a degree in literature can constitute a secondary asset since it guarantees the employer, in the absence of any useful skills, a certain intellectual agility that could lead to professional development—besides which, literature has always carried positive connotations in the world of luxury goods. (Stein 8)

According to this logic, if the social democratic state funds higher education, it is reasonable for it to expect some kind of benefit in return. Otherwise, higher education in the humanities does nothing more than perpetuate itself without producing any practical value. If all that interests François is his “friend” Huysmans, then he and his colleagues fail to deliver on the promise vested in them: they have no social impact and are incapable of being agents of change. Houellebecq challenges us to think of higher education as a commodity that offers low return on investment.

Ironically, in the last sentence of the novel, François tells us that if he chooses to return to university, “je n’aurais rien à regretter” (Houellebecq 300) ‘I would have nothing to mourn’ (Stein 246). He would be able to continue with his academic work. Entirely written in the conditional tense, the professor willfully agrees to succumb to the new order which is by definition aimed at restricting academic work and circumscribing scientific outcomes. In order to secure his return to academia he must convert to Islam—this is a prerequisite— and the conversion ceremony is depicted in the last chapter.

La cérémonie de la conversion, en elle-même, serait très simple ; elle se déroulerait probablement à la Grande mosquée de Paris, c’était plus pratique pour tout le monde. Vu ma relative importance le recteur serait présent, ou du moins l’un de ses collaborateurs proches. Rediger serait là aussi, bien entendu. Le nombre d’assistants n’était de toute façon pas imposé ; il y aurait d’ailleurs sans doute aussi quelques fidèles ordinaires, la mosquée n’était pas fermé pour l’occasion, c’était un témoignage que je devais porter devant mes nouveaux frères musulmans, mais égaux devant Dieu. (Houellebecq 297)

The conversion ceremony itself would be very simple. Most likely it would take place at the Paris Mosque, since that was easiest for all involved. Given my relative importance, the dean would be there, or at least one of his senior staff. Rediger would be there, too, of course. The number of guests was entirely up to me; no doubt there would be a few ordinary worshippers as well: the mosque wouldn’t close for the occasion. The idea was that I should bear witness in front of my new Muslim brothers, my equals in the sight of God. (Stein 244)

The novel’s final chord follows in the footsteps of Molière’s satirical tradition of ending a work with an anointment ceremony in order to provide the audience with a happy ending at all costs, as improbable, farfetched, or disingenuous as it might be. In the professor’s reincarnation as a Muslim brother, two currents run contrary to each other; this tension results in the dismantling of academia as a viable player in social life. With his conversion François *becomes* the politicized academician who neglects his scientific work while at the same time relinquishing his responsibility to his students.

**Conclusion**

At several points along the narrative, François directly refers to how the academics of his narrative world disavow their responsibility to society, which goes hand in hand with the intellectual elite’s powerlessness and insignificance in the sociopolitical environment: “L’intellectuel en France n’avait pas à être responsable, ce n’était pas dans sa nature” (Houellebecq 271) ‘For the French, an intellectual didn’t have to be responsible, that wasn’t his job’ (Stein 221, italics in the original). Elsewhere, in a moment of candid insight and self-appraisal, the narrator-protagonist asserts: “Une protestation même unanime des enseignants universitaires serait passée à peu près complètement inaperçue ; mais ça, en Arabie saoudite, ils ne pouvaient apparemment pas s’en rendre compte. Au fond, ils croyaient encore au pouvoir de l’élite intellectuelle, c’en était presque touchant” (Houellebecq 179) ‘Even if all the university teachers in France had risen up in protest, almost nobody would have noticed, but apparently they hadn’t found that out in Saudi Arabia, they still believed, deep down, in the power of the intellectual elite, it was almost touching’ (Stein 147).

In *Submission*, for an academic to refuse to be a political subject, to reject any autonomous agency outside their academic expertise, and to self-identify first and foremost as a political subject at the service of political ideologies is to strip academia of its basic values, the values of the secular republic. The main target of Houellebecq’s satire, then, is academia: for being irresponsible toward society.By overtly and directly politicizing universities and, conversely, by alienating academia from society, he portrays academics as intellectually and politically insignificant. More than anything, *Submission* hints at the extent to which ambivalence and uncertainty concerning what academia actually is and what should be expected of it can have negative repercussions: the French academic system abandons its social responsibilities with dire consequences for the entire body politic.

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1. The novel also addresses recurring themes in Houellebecq’s work: the crisis besetting Western civilization, particularly in light of the dissolution of communal ties; the effects of individualism, consumerism, and liberalism on intimate relationships; and how economic competition and market logic influence individuals’ relationships to society and to one another (Novak-Lechevalier; van der Goot). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Conversely, others have identified multiple, contradictory targets (see the section dedicated to the novel’s critical reception in Jurga and van Wesemael, 153-284). Very often these polemical readings are influenced by the public, high-profile personality of the author (Sturli). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. This and subsequent quotes are taken from the novel’s English translation by Lorin Stein (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. The author contends that the precarity of the protagonist stands out as a particularity in the novel, as he formulated in an interview with Valérie Toranian: “Quand on enlève tout à quelqu’un, est-ce qu’il existe encore ? ]…] Je réduis donc mon personnage, je l’anéanitis” (Houellebecq, 2020, 324) ‘When you take everything away from someone, does he still exist? Therefore, I crush my character, I destroy him’ (author’s translation). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Author’s translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Chantal Michel notes that this is reflected at a basic level in the representation of a literature professor who, in his scholarly readings of Huysmans, confuses the basic distinctions between the discrete conceptual entities of author, narrator, and implied author. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. As Guillaume Rousseau notes, Houellebecq hints that the intellectual elite is good for nothing in the epigraph of the novel, an extended citation from Huysmans’ *En Route*, where the final words are “bon à rien” (Rousseau, 121). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Also referred to as Professorromane, university fiction, or campus fiction. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Author’s translation. See also Edith Perry’s analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)