Houellebecq’s *Soumission* as a University Novel

Published in 2015, *Soumission* is a work of speculative fiction that takes place in the near future. It begins in 2017 and concludes with the 2022 elections; it describes the Muslim Brotherhood party’s political, religious, and social takeover of France. In the 2022 elections, the classical republican party ceases to exist, the Muslim Brotherhood and the radical right compete in a runoff, and the Muslim Brotherhood wins.

The Muslim Brotherhood’s victory has serious implications. It complicates French political life and challenges France’s traditional republican values. While moderate and rational, the Muslim theocracy that is established ceases to represent the values of 1789. Women are banned for the workplace and required to wear face coverings; citizens receive free education through primary school, but secondary and university education are privatized and must be paid for parents, guardians or students; institutions undergo Islamicization; polygamy, including pedophilic polygamy, are legitimized.

All of these events are woven into a plot centering on François, a forty-something protagonist suffering from what Baudrillard (2002) refers to as “the despair of one who has it all,” and the existential crisis he is facing. A professor of literature at the New Sorbonne University (Paris III), François specializes in the work of Joris-Karl Huysmans.

This is an extrême contemporain (extreme contemporary) novel. Houellebecq deals with a number of sensitive topics: immigration, the nation-state, the vision of the European Union, multiculturalism, ethnicity, religion, and the Left’s anti-racist tendency that overpowers its commitment to feminism and prevents it from criticizing the patriarchal structures characterizing immigrant communities.

The novel presents the loss of meaning, the loss of faith, and a culture where communal ties are dissipating. Yet its primary focus is the apathy and impotence of people, primarily academics, caused by liberal ideology itself that leads them to cede their basic values, the values of the secular republic (Carl Aubé Knausgaard).

An author of the extrême contemporain (extreme contemporary), Houellebecq challenges and attempts to aid readers in shaking off deleterious patterns of thought and fixed ways of thinking; he problematizes basic concepts that mold the way we think about the culture shaping our existence.

He is an author who poses questions rather than supplies answers.

Houellebecq’s writing is distinguished by how it inhibits the reader’s ability to arrive at a “bottom line” meaning and it problematizes the idea that such a meaning even exists.

A *Roman à thèse* without a thesis. Various aspects of the novel are constructed with the express purpose of undermining its thesis.

~~In his extremism, François is a sexist with an instrumental attitude toward women.~~

Its greatness that is

~~Trans écrivain~~

~~He creates a unique genre that resists the expectations of readers and forces them to move beyond their reading habits. He gives them a deceptive impression of things and creates confusion about what has been read and its character. Are they reading a literary work, an article, a treatise on logic and philosophy, or just bad writing (a great deal of pornographic content can be found in the novel).~~

~~The author Julian Barnes had this to say about Houellebecq: “While other authors go out to hunt rabbits, Houellebecq heads out to the forest after large predators.”~~

Michel Houellebecq’s novel

# There are many ways to read the novel: There are critics who read it as a satire of either French society or the French political system; those who read it as a futuristic political fantasy, political science fiction, or speculative fiction; those who view it as describing the crisis besetting the West, the crisis of the subject. This is, in fact, the theme of all of Houellebecq’s novels. Here he presents this theme upon a much larger canvas. This allows him to convey how economic competition and market logic influence individuals’ relationship to society and their relationship to one another. Others read the novel as a book about reading. What does it mean to be a reader and how do we read (two questions best answered through consideration of the novel’s connection to Huysman and his work)? What do we learn about Huysman through his reader and what do learn about Houellebecq’s literary work from Houellebecq? Huysman wrote decadent literature, a type of literature that blossomed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that expressed the fin de siècle’s nihilism. Jean des Esseintes, protagonist of Huysman’s novel *À rebours* (1884), presents how refinement and decline intertwine. Others read it as a novel about religion, secularization, and the possibility of religious faith in a “post-everything” world—post-capitalist, post-human, and postcolonial; others read it as a *Roman à thèse* without a clear thesis that employs every dialogue as an excuse for sociological and philosophical analyses.

# A novel of uncertain ideas/novel of ideas

# “Every narrative advance serves as an opportunity for a bracketed comment. It functions like stage direction that allows the author to let forth a remark, a sociopolitical speech; he overshadows the development of the plot by trying to astound the reader with his contemplative ability,” (on page 50 of this article).

# Popular literature—pornographic literature, a consumer product designed for the enjoyment of its audience (in opposition to what has been asserted above). Pornography with a metronomic pace—an example of the trivialization and provocation of the book.

# It is a naturalistic-realistic work like nineteenth century literary works. The presentation of the individual against a temporospatial background, where the individual, not the family, is treated as the fundamental building block of society recalls Balzac’s work. In fact, one can compare it to Balzac’s *César Birotteau* (1837).

# A social science text—political changes, market forces, gender relations, family structure, consumptive behavior, and even religious function are all traditional topics in the social sciences.

# One can even build an interpretation of the novel around Israel, since it depicts participation in efforts to boycott Israel as a steppingstone to academic advancement and it has François’ girlfriend Myriam immigrate to Israel.

# All the novel’s various elements are intertwined and in conversation with one another: the writing of Joris-Karl Huysmans, the homodiegetic narrator’s depressive character, the West and its values, France and the Republic—every paragraph in the book weaves them together.

# The reading that I will advance focuses on genre and takes the novel’s status as an academic novel serves as its starting point. The novel touches upon every aspects of academic life, many of which I have already addressed and others that I will subsequently address.

# The Content of the Novel

# The context in which the novel’s events are presented is typical of the academic novel. This context is foregrounded at the beginning and the ending of the novel and it serves as a common thread throughout it.

# How is the connection between academia and politics depicted?

# When I employ the term politics, I refer to it in the broadest sense: activity in the social realm; politics as activities that people perform to preserve or to change their mode of existence and social conditions within a complex social system. I am not using the term to refer to power relations or the politics of such and such political party or government. Indeed, the latter topic’s role in the novel is a good one for discussion, but I will not address it here.

# Before I turn to a discussion of the novel as an academic novel, I would like to note that it is difficult to classify. The book branches out in different directions and raises various questions ad libitum (at one’s pleasure).

# 1. Houellebecq’s novel possesses different layers, but we will focus upon the one dedicated to representation of academic life. I will provide an overview of the genre to help readers grasp the presence of generic elements in Houellebecq’s novel.

# The college, university, or campus novel is sometimes called a Professorromane, university fiction, or Academic novels. It was originally an Anglo-American genre.

# The expansion of access to higher education immediately following the conclusion of the Second World War and subsequent development of the field of higher education, brought about demographic changes that made the university a more socially and socioeconomically diverse place. They also contributed to significant expansion of the campus novel genre starting in the fifties. Kingsley Amis’ *Lucky Jim* (1954) is considered to be the first academic novel. Rather than setting it at Oxbridge, Amis sets *Lucky Jim* at Redbrick University. Redbrick university was a general appellation assigned to the English civic universities founded in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that focused on research in STEM fields. These universities were established, because classic liberal arts education was not considered practical and institutions that would serve the increasingly large numbers of students looking to enroll in institutions of higher education needed to be created. These institutions breached higher education’s fortified walls and broke the monopoly previously held by the ivory tower of academia.

# In the United States, the modern roots of the academic novel date back to the nineteenth century, a period of intense social change and industrial expansion that challenged the elitist cultural influence of privileged higher educational institutions, such as Oxford and Cambridge University in England and Harvard University in the United States. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Fanshawe* (1828) constitutes the first American academic novel writing.

# An additional factor behind the academic novel’s rise was the nineteenth century rise of industrial capitalism that caused renewed popular interest in academia.

# The campus environment was the novel’s milieu.

# Usually, an academic wrote the academic novel. Usually, it was set in the English literature department.

# This is a satirical novel that maps political and social developments in the academic world, and pokes fun at the faculty’s unproductive, useless, and ineffectual character and their disconnection from the reality behind college life and everyday existence as a whole.

# In principle, or perhaps just in appearance, academic life is safe and comfortable. It is primarily a communal life, even if it is fundamentally rooted in individualism.

# On the one hand it is a realm where one can take part in intellectual discourse with colleagues, but on the other hand it is an arena where one must take part in a high stakes competition with colleagues, since it is the quality of one’s research and one’s scholarly productivity that will guarantee professional success.

# As a result, there is a fundamental inequality in academic life.

# University politics have an unforgiving character.

# There are many reasons, like the tenure process, behind the interpersonal conflict inherent to academic life.

# The academic novel investigates

# It investigates ethical and philosophical questions that are endemic to the genre.

# The novel pays close attention to the politics of exclusion (pp. 329-340): The perpetual threat of begin removed from the community. The threat functions as a foreboding obstacle to the individual scholar’s success. All academic novels are constructed around the tension between idealism and competition that can also be understood as the tension between scholarship as an end in itself and scholarship as a means.

# End of page 332—It is not a coincidence that many of the best academic novels are those that conclude with somebody leaving academic life.

# As previously mentioned, the academic novel emphasizes comedy and satire and possesses a comic tone. In American literature, the academic novel employs more black humor and is more firmly rooted in a broader context where external social and political forces manifest themselves. Don Delillo, *White Noise* (1984); Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (2000).

# Satire criticizes specific human behavior and what it portrays it seeks to condemn as ridiculous. It attacks the vices and whims characteristic of academic life. One learns about how depravity mixes with intellect in the minds of academics, as well as what the limits of human understanding are.

# Academics constitute the ideal reading community, as well as actual reading community, for the academic novel. For this reason, the satire is directed towards academic readers who serve as the text’s ideal addressees. Ultimately, the academic novel is not composed for the enjoyment of people looking from outside at the capriciousness of others.

# Womack, 327:

# 2. *Soumission* as an Academic Novel

# The following topics that Houellebecq touches upon in *Soumission* help identify it as an academic novel. When he engages them, he delivers barbs against academia sotto voce (in a quiet voice).

# Depiction of individual commitment to academic professionalization as a fall from a golden age of dissertation writing, p. 13.

# The protagonist is a faculty member who finds teaching purposeless. He comes to campus to teach all his classes one morning a week and has little connection with his students. He loathes interacting with them and he could care less about them. Even though he only teaches one day a week, he still finds a way to complain about rude students who bother him with unimportant questions about insignificant poets, pp. 45-46.

# He displays apathy and a lack of interest in enraging doctoral candidates, pp. 49.

# There is a hunger for job security. While unfriendly, the academic job market is perpetually active. There are few positions and candidates compete with one another for them. A serious inequality characterizes academic life and the ethics of this situation as it pertians to tenure and promotion is constantly a subject of discussion.

# Research and the bumpy path to publication, as well as the uniquely strange and unforgiving character of university politics. In order to advance, one needs to constantly make decisions that have ethical implications. With whom should one ally? To whom should one suck up? What should one research?

# The mechanism by which people advance professionally, including promotion through flattery rather than the meeting of objective standards of excellence, p. 24.

# Rediger “distorts the texts” in his thesis, academic dishonesty, forgery, p. 229.

# The politicization of the academia— the university appoints a secretary of state, a position invented ad hominem for a specific individual, p. 253.

# There is a trivial reading audience for scholarship, p. 108.

# Every year, when it finds itself facing a new situation brought about by some type of disruption caused by the community, the faculty adapts anew. Every year the small world that academics have created for themselves disappears when the students scatter after the end of the academic year. This phenomenon manifests itself in a distorted way in François’ life, particularly in his relationships with his female students.

# The need to deal with the unstable nature of human existence brought on by global economic downturns, budgetary cuts, growing social divides on campus, the increasingly extreme character of identity politics (“*identitaires”* and français de souche), BDS, and anti-Semitism.

# Decreasing education standards, p. 249.

# The difficulty of writing and research—“I made progress on the footnotes, but I got stuck working on the introduction,” p. 257.

# *Soumission* as an Academic Novel-The Main Theme it Explores

# It begins as an academic novel and academia serves as its primary context.

# Read as an academic novel, the book offers a tragicomic look at the connection between the intellectual world and politics and concentrates its attention upon the nature of this connection.

# Its motto is:

״אין ספק שהם הפריזו מאד בהערכת יכולתם של המצרים באקדמיה להוות מטרד, ביכולתם להוביל מסע מחאה [...] מחאה אפילו פה אחד של מרצים באוניברסיטאות תעבור פחות או יותר בלי להיות מורגשת בכללותה; אבל את זה, בערב הסעודית, הם לא יכולים לדעת. ביסודו של דבר, הם האמינו עדיין בכוחה של האליטה האינטלקטואלית, זה היה כמעט נוגע ללב״ (וולבק, *כניעה*, 169)

# Why does the intellectual elite not have power? Why is the political life of intellectuals in academia characterized by impotence and insignificance?

# I see Houellebecq headed in three different directions when responding to these questions and I will discuss each of them and their intellectual implications in turn.

# The classic academic novel focuses on academic life—the realm of the Humanities in particular. Here its characters exist at a far remove from the amazing events taking place beyond the gates of the university. The juxtaposition of what is taking place in the academy and what is taking place outside it creates a sense of absurd disconnection.

# In satire, the absurd is what is being criticized.

# At the same time, the nation and society constitute a civilization in decline.

# Economic stagnation and dwindling confidence in society.

# One answer is seclusion in the ivory tower and separation from the teeming reality below.

# François, who is not an engaged individual, says that “he feels as political as a bath towel,” (46), and publicly admits that politics and history do not interest him. He merely observes events.

# François, who faithfully engages in textual interpretation, knows how to assign meaning to texts and makes connections between authors, periods, and ideas, but he demonstrates impotence and disinterest when facing events taking place outside the university.

# He is not oblivious, and he exploits chance meetings to discuss things.

# His response is flight. That is to say, he avoids getting involved and getting muddied by reality when he flees to the provinces. He is apathetic there too and thinks about nobody but himself. Hungry and running out of gas, he stops off at a gas station to fill up his tank and finds that has been looted. He reveals “the cashier lying on the floor in a pool of blood.”

# Page 121: I returned to the store; I was forced to jump over the corpse […] after a moment’s hesitation, I took a tuna sandwich with vegetables, an alcohol-free beer and a Michelin Guide from the shelves.” Then he gets back into his car and continues on his way. This description presents a juxtaposition and an overturning of hierarchies. François procures a sandwich and skips lightly over a human corpse. This voices his disconnection, something reinforced by his failure to pay because there is neither a cash register nor a cashier to take his money.

# For example, François asks, “Are two parties that have dominated French political life since the beginning of the Fifth Republic going to disappear?” (p. 71). He then decides that this matter is significant enough that he should watch a television debate between the candidates.

# The novel juxtaposes the fateful and the banal when François decides to watch the debate while eating a microwave dinner. Yet the hierarchical relationship between the debate and microwave dinner is subsequently flipped. Even though he has decided that it is important to watch the debate, François gets caught up heating his dinner after his microwave malfunctions and misses the debate.

# François observes signs heralding a political upheaval, but he fails to process them. As long as they do not personally affect him, they do not capture his attention. That is to say, as long as these events do not prevent him from sharing his life with an old friend, the object of his research, he remains oblivious.

# When he listens to the speech of the Muslim electoral candidate, he shares with his countrymen

# מין ספקנות כללית, התחושה שאין כאן שום סיבה להזדעק, ושאין בכך שום דבר חדש״.

# (p. 103).

# Example One:

# Examples of the way that Houellebecq depicts the academic hidden away in the ivory tower far from politics: exaggerated events that take place and feature the protagonists dealing with the most insignificant details apathetic to what is going on around them.

# It finds expression in a number of excerpts:

Pp 112-113—there is a gathering of storm clouds, “I dove into what had gone into disuse.” A metaphor of entrenchment below ground. A huge crowd participates in a procession led by Marine La Pen down the Champs-Élysées

״: ״הסערה המשיכה עדיין לאיים; הענן עצום הממדים היה עכשיו תלוי, חסר תנועה, מעל לתהלוכה. אחרי כמה דקות נמאס לי, וצללתי שוב לתוך *נטוש*.״ 113

A literal cloud approaches and with it a storm. Yet it is a metaphor. A danger threatens republican values. Two metaphors: an upper one and a lower one. A figurative cloud, an approaching danger. Diving into the text, meaning to delve into it, something which is François’ work as literary scholar. Yet diving can also be understood as diving beneath the surface of reality in an effort to avoid it.

Example One

״במשך כמה שנים, וללא ספק אפילו כמה עשורים, נהג *לה מונד*, בדרך כלל יותר מכל עיתוני המרכז-שמאל, כלומר למעשה יותר מכל העיתונים, לתקוף בקביעות את ה׳קסנדרות׳ שחזו מלחמת אזרחים בין המהגרים המוסלמים והאוכלוסיה המקומית של אירופה המערבית. כפי שהסביר לי אחד מעמיתי שלימד ספרות יוונית, לאמיתו של דבר, השימוש הזה במיתוס של קסנדרה היה מוזר. במיתולוגיה היוונית, קסנדרה מוצגת תחילה כנערה יפהפיה, ׳קסנדרה הדומה-לאפרודיטת-הזהב,׳ כותב הומרוס. אפולו, שהתאהב בה, מעניק לה את מתנת הנבואה בתמורה להתעלסויותיהם בעתיד. קסנדרה מקבלת את המתנה, אבל מסרבת לאל, שבחמתו יורק על פיה, ובכך מונע ממנה לנצח להיות מובנת או מעוררת אמון בשומעיה. וכך היא מנבאת, בזה אחר זה, את חטיפתה של הלנה על ידי פאריס, לאחר מכן את פרוץ מלחמת טרויה, ומזהירה את תושבי טרויה מפני התחבולה היוונית (׳הסוס הטרויאני׳ המפורסם) שאיפשרה להם לכבוד את העיר. סופה שהיא נרצחת על ידי קליטמנסטרה, רצח שגם אותו חזתה, וכן את זה של אגממנון, שסירב להאמין לה. בסיכומו של דבר, קסנדרה משמשת דוגמה לנבואות פסימיות שהתגשמו בעקביות, ובהחלט נדמה, בהתחשב בעובדות, שהעיתונאים של המרכז-שמאל אינם אלא משחזרים את עיוורונם של הטרויאנים. עיוורון זה אינו חידוש היסטורי: אפשר היה למצוא כמותו אצל האינטלקטואלים, הפוליטיקאים והעיתונאים בשנות השלושים של המאה העשרים, שהיו בדעה אחת שהיטלר ׳בסופו של דבר יחזור לפעול בתבונה׳. סביר להניח שבלתי אפשרי, לאנשים שחיו ושגשגו בשיטה חברתית נתונה, לדמיין את נקודת המבט של אלה, שמעולם לא היה להם למה לצפות מהשיטה הזאת, ששקלו את הריסתה ללא בהלה מיוחדת.

אך למען האמת, מזה כמה חדשים, גישת אמצעי התקשורת של המרכז -שמאל השתנתה: האלימות בפרוורים, העימותים הבין-גזעיים, כבר לא דיברו על זה כלל, הבעיה פשוט הושתקה, ואף הפסיקו לתקוף את ה׳קסנדרות׳, שבסופו של דבר הושתקו. נראה היה שהאנשים באופן כללי נלאו מלשמוע שוב ושוב דיבורים על הנושא הזה; ובחוג החברתי שהסתובבתי בו, הקדימה הלאות להשתרר יותר מבכל מקום אחר; התחושה הכללית הסתכמה בכך שיקרה ׳מה שצריך לקרות׳. וכשלמחרת בערב, כשהלכתי לקוקטייל הטרימסטריאלי ב *Journal des dix-neuvièmistes* , כבר ידעתי שהעימותים במונפרמיי יעוררו תגובות ספורות, לא יו יותר מהדיונים שקדמו לסיבוב הבחירות הראשון לנשיאו, והרבה פחות מהמינויים האחרונים באוניברסיטאות. הקוקטייל נערך ברחוב שפטל, במוזיאון החיים הרומנטיים, שנשכר לצורך האירוע.״ (וולבק, כניעה, 51 – 52)

These are questions that Hoellebecq raises and then proceeds to dismantle and undercut as he so often does. While François’ devotion to his academic research leads him to cut himself off from others, there is another reason for his isolation:

# Even though François, the protagonist and Huysman scholar, understands that there are those who are hurt by the system (as mentioned in the quote above), his generic French name prevents him from standing out and aids him in blending in, in contrast with immigrants shaped by the effects of colonialism, and aids him in personifying Français de souche (a controversial expression employed to refer to “true” French people who do not have clear or immediate ties to foreign lands in their families).

To the French province Perigord.

The newspapers attack the Cassandras, that is to say those who prophesize doom and discount the value of forecasts that are based on empirical evidence. As an academic specialist, the scholar of Ancient Greek literature explains that the way that the myth of Cassandra is used is incorrect, because it does not wholly align with the myth itself (here we will not get into why *Le Monde* thinks that references to prophesizing Cassandras are a mistake, because the myth speaks of accurate prophecies that people fail to adequately comprehend). The expert who specializes in some type of suprasegmental does not see any way of bridging between the myth and its contemporary use and proves unable to separate the wheat from the chaff: rather than relating to the context in which the myth is being used—“marginal” external events, like the Muslim party seizing control of the state- he explains why the contemporary use of the myth is *inexact*. This is a privileged, comic, and skewed way of looking at things. Yet, in satire, the absurd (those who hide away in the ivory tower) is what is being criticized.

The academic can also bring examples from history or generalize and make sense of the interests of social groups struggling for hegemony. Yet understanding of the situation remains abstract and does not get to the heart of things. The knowledgeable intellectual does not draw conclusions about reality, because this is not his bailiwick. Therefore, he cannot be political in any practical sense of the term. In other words, he can neither influence those he addresses nor call them to action.

And in the end, even if he would try to act politically, advancement would remain an enjoyable topic that he would prefer to talk about more than anything else. In a manner bordering on cynicism, this is what Houellebecq ironically depicts taking place at the Museum of Romantic Life.

Disconnection from reality, the realm of the ivory tower and the bubble.

And here is a final example:

״מאז ומתמיד אהבתי את ליל הבחירות לנשיאות; אני אפילו חושב שלהוציא את גמר אליפות העולם בכדורגל, זו היתה תכנית הטלוויזיה החביבה עלי ביותר. המתח היה כמובן נמוך יותר, הבחירות פועלות לפי מנגנון נרטיבי ייחודי של סיפור שסופו ידוע החל בדקה הראשונה; אבל המגוון הקיצוני של המעורבים (הפרשנים הפוליטיים, העורכים הפוליטיים ׳מהשורה הראשונה׳, המוני האוהדים האחוזים בצחוק או בדמע במטות המפלגות שלהם.... וכמובן הפוליטיקאים, ההצהרות שלהם בזמן אמת, מחושבות או נרגשות), ההתרגשות הכללית של המשתתפים באמת יצרה רושם נדיר כל כך, יקר ערך כל כך, טלוויזיוני כל כך, של רגע היסטורי בשידור ישיר.״ 69

The quote employs the literary critic’s tools to relate to insignificant details rather than what really matters. The elections are a genre of television programming with a choice narrative structure. The elements of the genre create the impression of an historic moment, the result of a specific pragmatic poetics. Secondary details replace principle concerns, the banal assumes the elevated position previously held by weighty issues, etc. Analyze the narrative structure and ignore the terrifying content.

*Soumission* describes the process by which the elite accedes to developments taking place right before its eyes. It witnesses things and perhaps even know how to analyze them, but it is unconcerned by them. There is no political activity or any real interest in it.

Houellebecq problematizes the idea of an intellectual and delves into the distinction between an intellectual and an academician.

The distinction between an intellectual and an academic. He also asks what responsibility academia has towards society, especially in times of crisis.

The distinction between academician and intellectual. They are not necessarily overlapping terms. Specializing in suprasegmentals and seeing oneself as a professional expert or seeing oneself as possessing a broader understanding of issues and a responsibility towards society.

An academic is an expert in his field, a professional in his particular area who is enclosed within it.

An intellectual is more open to society and employs his area of expertise to look beyond his area of expertise. He is committed to a moral society and his involvement with society is both emotional and social.

The academic elite’s role in times of crisis

A “Republic of Science” that ignores the political reality until it penetrates the academy.

Society relies on the academy, because it is the source of knowledge and understanding of the world. All of these academicians preserve the inalienable assets of an expansive French culture by having each one of them select one nineteenth century author to focus upon, but they display a lack of interest in reality. Therefore, they are irrelevant to political life.

I am moving beyond Houellebecq’s text:

* The existence of academics who view themselves as primarily responsible to the realm of scholarship is an issue currently preoccupying scholars and administrators as the Humanities are being increasingly managed in accordance with business principles.
* The Modern Language Association (MLA)
* Open Access as a new model for the publication of academic articles
* Public Humanities

Example 2

The gaze that is cast upon the Humanities in general and seclusion in the ivory tower in particular is an even more unstable gaze:

״במשך כמה שנים איפשרו השרידים האחרונים של סוציאל-דמוקרטיה גוססת (באמצעות מלגת לימודים, שיטה של הנחות וזכויות סוציאליות נרחבות, ארוחות גרועות אך זולות במסעדות האוניברסיטאיות) להקדיש את כל ימי לפילות שבחרתי: התרועעות נטולת אילוצים עם חבר.״ עמ׳ 12

״הלימודים האקדמיים בתחום הספרות מובילים כיודע פחות או יותר לשום מקום, להוצאי אולי את התלמידים המוכשרים ביותר שמזומנת להם קריירה של הוראה באקדמיה בתחום לימודי הספרות – מצב קומי למדי, שיצרה שיטה שתכליתה האחת היא שכפולה העצמי תוך יצירת כישלונות של מעל 95 אחוז.

יחד עם זאת, הם אינם מזיקים, ואף יכולים להיות שימושיים במידת הצורך. צעירה שמגישה את מועמדותה למשרת זבנית בסלין או בהרמס תצטרך באופן טבעי ובעדיפות עליונה להפקיד על הופעתה: אבל תואר ראשון או שני בספרות מודרנית יכול להוות נכס משני שיבטיח למעסיקה, בהנחה שיש לה מיומנויות שימושיות, גמישות אינטלקטואלית מסוימת שמאפשרת התפתחות מקצועית – צריך להוסיף שהספרות נהנתה תמיד מדימוי חיובי בקרב תעשיית היוקרה.״ עמ׳ 14

Literary Studies represent a type of academic freedom where one is free of any practical obligation or any tangible demand, reductio ad absurdum.

The protagonist is a member of the New Sorbonne University’s French Literature department. It is clearly a luxury to have the financial mechanisms of a social democracy pay you to lead a privileged life, especially at a time that political intrigue is bringing about the collapse of this political system. Nonetheless, François chooses to ignore this collapse.

It is a luxury, because François does not attribute any practical value to literary study. With their 5% budgetary allowance, they perpetuate the system and do not see a reason to do anything more.

This accords with what is said elsewhere in the novel. For example, on pages 25 and 26, François complains about the students. The lecture halls are half empty; the students are not engaged and never interrupt his lectures with questions; students just sit there and take notes.

According to the academic protagonist, there is a lack of connection between humanistic study and society. This is due to the fact that graduates’ real needs are not met through humanistic study, because literary studies do not prepare them for anything that can contribute to society.

I must emphasize that this is a biting satire. Narrative choices have been made to convey these controversial ideas in this manner.

Hyperbole, caricature, and the absurd are employed to represent everything.

Discourse is intentionally grotesque, heterodox and disturbing.

The author employs this discourse in an effort to expose, rather than blur, the existence of weak thinking, or “default positions,” that pop up in seemingly logical arguments.

A series of apodictic statements proceed to reductio ad absurdum.

He scorns political correctness.

A very simplistic tendency lacking in nuances

He presents a brutal acting out.

There is a categorical tone.

Clearly, literary theory is relevant to the problems the world faces outside the lecture hall. Academia and ideas that originated in the ivory tower have impacted society. If fact, the multicultural politics that prove unsuccessful in the novel are actually the product of French post-structuralist thought. It destabilizes normative society, challenges the ideas of truth and the superiority of Western values, and introduces discourse analysis and the connection between power and knowledge.

If we imagine academia as a store, then many of the luxurious consumers goods presented in the display window would be prestigious works of French scholarship—works produced at the Sorbonne, French literary criticism, and works of literary theory written by famous French writers like Barthes and Foucault. Such “goods,” which certainly occupy a position in France’s intellectual display window, are exported abroad and it makes sense that the French government would finance them.

On the other hand, if one looks beyond the display window to the interior of the store, one finds academics living in their own private bubbles like goldfish in bowls.

Yet lets now place the questions of how to value the humanities and what the state/society expect from intellectuals who engage in literary studies into the oscillator. Should scholars be allowed to produce scholarship whose circulation is low?

The academician does not feel an obligation to anything, not even to social democracy, the source of its funding, which is on the verge of collapse. He feels no obligation to those who established a magnificent department at the Sorbonne dedicated to his field.

Houellebecq challenges us to think about higher education accordance to the principles of liberal economics which view knowledge as merchandise.

This is not unfounded. Academia and the world around it are in transition.

In the late capitalist world oriented towards production and return on investment, one observes a decrease in enrollment in the Humanities.

According to the logic of late capitalism, if the state funds higher education, it is reasonable for it to expect some kind of benefit in return. Otherwise, higher education does nothing more than maintain itself, an idea that can be taken to the extremes.

Exact science and practical science are funded out of a hope that they will invent something beneficial to society that will take on monetary value after being patented. Perhaps Humanities departments receive less funding, because those working in the Humanities do not produce things that have a clear monetary value. Nonetheless, its merchandise needs to be taken out of the ivory tower, so that it can have an impact in the sociopolitical arena.

I am now setting aside the text to discuss issues beyond it:

Provide an in-depth discussion of Gayatri Spivak’s last two books: *Death of a Discipline* and *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*.

She has written how the practice of literary studies, reading in one’s mother tongue, is the path towards educating a populace and empowering it; for the several decades, she has spent her summers teaching female primary school teachers in India’s Bengal region.

Example 3

The intellectual that serves political interests is connected to those promoting the political interests of those with money and power

There are two academics who are directly involved in politics:

Rediger opposes Israel and leads a boycott against it. His politics prove beneficial when the Saudis appoint him university president after purchasing the university.

Lempereur participates in the reactionary Identitarian movement

# Acting out of self-interest, both of them work to dismantle the secular republic and enable an Islamic republic to take control of France.

# For practical reasons, Rediger offers him a job: He wants to bring “truly honorable professors, possessing a truly cosmopolitan consciousness,” to the university, (p. 232). In other words, he wants to have better merchandise to place in the display window.

״אין לי משהו מיוחד להציע לך. כלומר כן, במישור הכספי יש לי הרבה מה להציע לך, אתה יודע זאת היטב, ואחרי הכל, גם זה נחשבץ אבל במישור האינטלקטואלי, המשרה הזאת בסורבון, היא פחות יוקרתית מפיקוח על מהדורת פליאד; אני מודע לכך. אני יכול לפחות להבטיח, להבטיח באופן אישי, שהעבודה האמיתית שלך לא תופרע. כל שיהיה עליך לעשות זה לתת כמה קורסים קלים, קורסי מבוא שמיועדים לתלמידי השנים א׳ וב׳. הדרכת דוקטורנטים – אני יודע שזה שוחק, עשיתי את זה מספיק בעצמי – תיחסך ממך. אני יכולה לארגן את זה בקלות, מבחינה סטטוטורית״. (232)

# Since academic work is produced in a closed system, this is how Rediger’s offer looks: He displays contempt for the part of academic work involving the spread and dissemination of knowledge, and only assigns symbolic value to the prestige held by professors.

# And this is the first stage: Rediger is appointed to serve as the minister for higher education. He is a scathing example of a politician who serves political interests. In order to work at the Sorbonne, one must assume a designated lifestyle and convert to Islam. This is an example of forced conformity to a specific worldview and an attempt to make scholars support this worldview. Seemingly, external funding (Saudi money) only dictates a specific lifestyle and has no bearing on what people research. Yet this is the next step.

# Personal interest pushes faculty members to do things to maintain their status or to accrue new privileges, even if these privileges only become available through the withholding of women’s rights and the loss of equality (Van den Brandt 197), and the dismantlement of the structures of state.

# The results of these moves lead to society’s Islamicization. The academic is not responsible here either. He just used his status and intelligence to earn a living.

״אבל מה שהדהים אותי בפגישתנו, והדהים אותי עוד יותר בספרו, היה הצד הזה של שיח מושחז היטב, שקירב את רדיז׳ה באופן בלתי נמנע אל הזירה הפוליטית. לא דיברנו בכלל על פוליטיקה, באותו אחר-צהרים שלנו בבית ברחוב דז-ארן; אב לא הופתעתי כלל, שבוע מאוחר יותר, כשבזכות התערבות מיניסטריאלית קלה הוא מונה למזכיר המדינה לאוניברסיטאות, תפקיד שנוצר במיוחד בשבילו.

בניתיים גיליתי במקרה שהוא מצטייר כהרבה פחות זהיר במאמרים שפרסם בכתבי עת חשאיים יותר כגון כ*תב העת ללימודים פלסטיניים* ו*אומה*. חזור הסקרנות של העיתונאים היה ברכה אמיתית לאינטלקטואלים, מפני שכל החומר הזה זמין בקלות באינטרנט היום. והיה נדמה לי שחלק מהמהאמרים שלו היו יכולים לעלות לו בכמה הסתבכויות; אבל אחרי הכל אולי עני טועה, כל כך הרבה אינטלקרואלים לכל אורך המארה ה-20 תמכו בסטלין, במאו או בפול פוט ואף פעם לה הזיק להם באמת; אינטלקטואל בצרפת לא נדרש להיות א*חראי*, האחריות אינה מטבעו״ 253

Here Houellebecq places the idea of possession of specific political views as a tool for career advancement into the oscillator. Here the political position that offers the opportunity for advancement is opposition to Israel. With all due respect to Israel, this issue is not of primary importance to the people of France. If one examines the call to boycott Israel made by the Left, one can observe the biting discursive tone of the politician rather than a sober academic tone of one observing from a distance, looking at things in comparative perspective, considering examples from different times and places, and asking questions. Here the biting discursive tone comes as a force to damage and destroy.

This is a satire of the politically engaged intellectual.

I would now like to engage with issues outside of the text:

In the last few decades, the economic model [of higher education] involves universities opening branches in the Global South. It seems that there is a clear economic rationale for spreading knowledge where there are many potential students. Yet will this not affect academic freedom? Since 2006, an agreement has been in place between Sorbonne University and Abu Dhabi, not Dubai as presented in the novel. The novel depicts this as a new project. In fact, steps have not been taken to build upon such intervarsity agreements. Do agreements between the Sorbonne and Dubai or Abu Dhabi represent progress and knowledge sharing, or do they represent a shameful submission to the “knowledge economy” that functions in accordance with the laws of the global market?

On the one hand, they effectively distribute knowledge and world-changing ideas.

On the other hand, can ideas really be expressed there? The opinion of those in power always prevails.

In conclusion, this is a novel with tons of ideas, weighty and important ones. Yet its narrative frame, established at the beginning and the end of the novel, focuses attention on the academic world and literary studies in particular. Consideration of the academic world serves as the impetus for the novel.

The hyperbolic, grotesque, and polemic treatment of attacks on sensitive targets (in this case the academic world) are first and foremost powerful tools for the examination of patterns of thought grounded in unexamined presuppositions. *Soumission* depicts the French intellectual elites in a grotesque manner. More than anything, it voices the extent confusion and uncertainty concerning what academia actually is and what should be expected of it. One can also view this provocative narrative structure as highly sophisticated. Through the provocations of its performative expression of the challenges facing higher educations, it finds an effective way to comment on them. This is also a narrative structure that expresses its belief in the ability and the desire of readers to deal with the challenge of a complex academic world that has lost its direction.