Academia, Politics and Politicization in Michel Houellebecq’s *Soumission*

“They still believed, seep down, in the power of the intellectual elite. It was almost touching” (Houellebecq, 2016, 147)

Introduction

**Michel Houellebecq’s novel 2015 Soumission** branches out in different directions *ad libitum***.** **One stark direction is reading the novel as a satirical critique of French society (Scurati, 2017; –RF ----** Brühwiler, 2022) marking the disintegration of the traditional political body when facing inevitable challenges which France and Europe confront; immigration and multiculturalism, the dissolution of nation-state, the vision of the European Union, French identity, ethnicity and religion are among the topics raised in the novel.[[1]](#footnote-2)

*Soumission* relates an alternative history of France beginning in 2017, recounting the Islamic party’s victory in the presidential elections. By the 2022 elections, the Republican party ceases to exist, and the Muslim Brotherhood and radical Right compete in a runoff, won by the latter. This victory has egregious implications, While moderate and levelheaded, the newly established Muslim theocracy 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 veil their faces; all citizens receive free primary education, but secondary and university education are privatized; institutions become Islamized; polygamy and child marriages are legitimized. All of these events are woven into a plot centering on François, a forty-something university professor who specializes in the writings of Karl-Joris Huysmans, from whose perspective the events are related.

Read as a satire, Soumission is faithful to the author’s signature postmodernist poetics of destabilization and deconstruction (Buchweitz 2015). The novel’s infrastructure relies on an apparent “constitutive ambivalence” (Novak-Lechevalier 2017,154) wherein the novelistic techniques undermine the reader’s ability to arrive at a bottom line thesis the author propagates. That extracting a precise target of critique from the layers of irony that engulf the text is made impossible has been observed by scholars (Morrey, (Scurati 2017) ).[[2]](#footnote-3) As Henry F. Smith (2022) points out, Francois’s proposition “you know I am not *for* anything” (emphasis in the original) is a telltale note on the author’s nihilistic stance and narrational techniques (Smith, 182).[[3]](#footnote-4)

The use of black irony (Courteau 2015, 84) and cynicism are intended to unsettle the text and are meant to resist, counteract and make aware. But the most prominent structural device that unsettles the extraction of a fixed target is the narrative voice, 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 2020, 350). The reliability of the narrator is constantly put into question,[[4]](#footnote-5) casting doubt on the narrator’s propositions and undermining his position-taking since, it is difficult to decipher “the position of the implied author against which to measure that of the narrator”. The unreliable Francois clearly violates both many of the standards upheld by today’s culture and widely accepted norms and values. Francois’s treatment of his female students gives plain evidence to that: he maintains transient sexual relations with his students, which are short lived and last for as long as the academic year lasts. (pp--) with the exception of Miriam, to whom he grows attached. This flagrant avowal of abuse of power is either an “unwitting self-exposure or unintentional betrayal of personal shortcomings” (Nünning 2005, 100) or an intentional provocation of an unequivocal ethically problematic conduct. In both cases the reliability of the narrator is undermined. Hence, the critique of French society as one ready to cede its liberal values and to sacrifice women’s rights in exchange for civil peace and prosperity with the rise of the Muslim administration is *apriori* undermined as it turns out the same elite never lived up to its proclaimed values with regards to women.

Hence, as a satirical depiction of contemporary France, soumission is intended to dismantle, unmask and disturb (Scurati 2017, 170-171, Almeida 2015, Blanchard 2018) but precisely what is the object of attack dispersed and unfocused. There is an unstable tense relation between certainty and indeterminacy is an invitation to evade closure .

However, if we shift our attention to the narrator as a member of the academy suddently the irony is focused, fixed and stable, meant to alarm and alert against a social phenomenon with depicting an object of ridicule which is the object of critique. The unreliable academic narrator is ridiculed, and in a satire the object of ridicule is the object of critique.

# 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.

# In this article I will advance a reading of the *Soumission* as university novel wherein academia is the focus of critique. The political intrigue intertwined with François and his colleagues’ reactions, or lack thereof, to the amazing events taking place outside the gates of academia are the initiator to a critique of the academy, specifically the humanities.

# The intellectual elite “good for nothing” (Houellebecq 2016, 1)) are indifferent, inept and disinterested in voicing out an opinion or if does voice out one it is in the service of personal objectives (Rousseau 2018, 121, Michel 2021, Knausgaard 2015, Morrey 2020, 349). [[5]](#footnote-6)

# The context in which the novel’s events are presented is typical of the academic novel. This context is foregrounded at the charged points of the beginning and the ending of the novel and it serves as a its primary context. The first chapter walks us through the milestones in Francois’s academic career from its inception while the last chapter envisions his rejuvenated career at the Sorbonne after converting to Islam. And, the campus environment, both the geographical and the conceptual, is the novel’s milieu throughout.

#  The 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. Chantal Michel notes, “en temps de crise, mus par la peur, résignés et apathiques, François et ses collègues ne songent qu’à leur survie et à leur intérêt et ils se content d’espèrer le retour d’un monde sûr […] Lempereur et bien d’autres mettent à profit leur apathie pour agir en sous-main.” (Michel, ----, pg. )[[6]](#footnote-7) Submission reexamines the humanities’ responsibility and commitment to society, as well as their complex relationship with politics, both on and off campus. Houellebecq challenges his readers and problematizes some basic concepts and premises that shape academia as it is today.

# As a campus novel, Soumission touches specifically on the connection between academia and politics and the relevance and value of the humanities to society.

# The Campus Novel

# A campus novel[[7]](#footnote-8) is set within the enclosed world of a college or university and highlights the follies of academic life. It 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. The academic novel investigates ethical and philosophical questions that are endemic to the genre. As Womack 2005 notes, these novels may question the “relevance of literary theory to the problems that plague the world beyond the halls of the academy” (335) or critique “the academy’s capacity for engendering genuine educational and social change when its most cherished principles evince little practical application” (333)/

# Campus novels pay 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. Womack, 327:

# As Womack explains, 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 which leads to an unforgiving competition and interpersonal conflicts inherent to academic life.

# *Soumission* as a university novel

# In Soumission, Houellebecq touches upon several issues concerning the academic lifecycle*,* these are classical themes dealt with in the campus novel that barbs are delivered against.

# Firstly, the commitment to academic professionalization which is indifferent to the student *customers*. François is a faculty member who finds teaching purposeless. He comes to campus to teach all his classes solely 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. In his mind, the mandatory teaching and the commitment to educate a generation of students, is the fall from a golden age of dissertation writing, p. 13. CITE

# Another issue at stake is the perpetually active hunger for job security, as there are few positions and candidates compete with one another for them. The novel demonstrates the ethics of this situation as it pertains to tenure and promotion is constantly a subject of discussion. Part and parcel of this is research and the bumpy path to publication, In order to advance, one needs to constantly make decisions that have ethical implications. With whom to ally, what to research. Houellebecq hints at the mechanism by which people advance professionally, including promotion through flattery rather than the meeting of objective standards of excellence, p. 24. And we see Steve appointed as tenured faculty due to his excellent sexual performance as Chantal Delouse’s, the former university president , lover (pg. 29). Newly appointed university president, Robert Rediger’s opportunism manifests itself also in the form of scientific falsification, as he “distorts the texts” (229) in his thesis, performing de facto academic dishonesty, forgery. All take part in the trading of and competition over academic positions, with some mega-academicians who are offered better contracts with outstanding salaries and benefits. The encumbering process of writing and research is also addressed; several times Francois gives out how “I made progress on the footnotes, but I got stuck working on the introduction,” p. 257. And that there is a trivial reading audience for scholarship, p. 108. Decreasing education standards, p. 249.

# WOMACK the Every year, when academia 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, in his relationships with his female students, as discussed earlier.

# And, finally, In the background of Houellebecq’s depiction of the social, ethical and financial aspects of an academic career subsist currents issues in academia, which involve the need to deal with the unstable nature of human existence brought on by global economic downturns, budgetary cuts, growing social divides on campus, and the increasingly extreme character of identity politics, BDS.

# Read as an academic novel, Soumission offers a tragicomic outlook at the connection between the intellectual world and politics since all of it is set simultaneously and within the political intrigue unfolding outside the campus gates . The two contexts are manifestly juxtaposed and concentrates its attention upon the nature of this connection. it offers a repetitive series of scenes that circumscribe, complicate and reiterate the question of the notion of academia and its relation to political trend and upheavals.

# Here I employ the term “politics” in a broader sense, as an activity designed to preserve or to change the mode of existence and living conditions within a complex social system. A campus novel is habitually set within the confines of campus, but *Soumission* juxtaposes the depiction of academic life with the unfolding of events outside. Thus it raises the question of academic responsibility for society, especially in times of crisis. Evidently, the novel’s “Republic of Science” ignores political reality even when it encroaches on the ivory tower.

# Houellebecq heads in two directions when responding to these questions. On the one hand, over-involvement in politics, with debilitating implications for research and teaching. On the other hand, under-involvement in political life, which amounts to the disengagement of the ivory tower from the teeming reality below it, with consequences in terms of both social irresponsibility and a negative return on government investment.

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# Over involovement

The obvious manifestation of the politicization of academia is personified, in both real life and *Soumission*, by the intellectual who serves political interests, or seeks promotion by associating with those with money and power. This is overt and opportunistic conduct and in *Soumission*, it involves taking part in efforts to boycott Israel as a steppingstone to academic promotion and then promulgating the Islamic party’s concepts in writing and in action.

# Academia is susceptible to politicization since academic life is an arena founded on high-stakes competition with those colleagues, a basically unequal space where the quality of one’s scholarly output is not the only thing that counts. Competition over tenure, combined with coping with constant budget cuts, growing social divides on and off campus, particularly the growing radicalism of identity politics and nowadays the cancel culture require academics to take the right political side. Or the other way round: academics can abstain form political life via their elevated status and purported disengagement from real life.

The political career of François’ superior Prof. Rediger is marked by direct involvement in politics. In return for converting to Islam and propagating Islamic politics he is awarded not only professorship, butalso appointment as president of the universityafter the Sorbonne is purchased by the Saudi government.Following the elections, he compensated for his loyalty by being appointed Minister of Higher Education, as “thanks to some minor ministerial reshuffling, Rediger had been named secretary of universities – a post they’d revived just for him” (pg. 221)

Redige’s political bias goes hand in hand with inaccuracies in his research, as he himself admits to François, “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” (p. 200).[[8]](#footnote-9)

Once appointed university president Rediger declares that in order to work at the Sorbonne, one must convert to Islam. Personal interest pushes faculty members to comply. Acting out of self-interest, these professors work to dismantle the secular republic and enable an Islamic republic to tighten its control over France’s culture.

The 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 want to bring to the university “truly honorable professors, possessing a truly cosmopolitan consciousness”, (p. 202). He goes on to admit his failure in enlisting faculty “who are truly eminent, who have real international reputations”, and offers “plenty of money”.He concedes that a teaching position at the Sorbonne is no longer that prestigious, but promises that “nothing would be allowed to interfere with your real work […]No hard classes […] No dissertations to advise” (p. 202). In other words, Rediger wants François to serve as the crumbling university’s window dressing.

# Under involvement

# The chief contemporary trend satirized in *Soumission* is the under-involvement or depoliticization of academia, in the sense of seclusion in the ivory tower and separation from the teeming reality below.

# François declares himself to be “about as political as a bath towel,” (p. 37), and publicly admits that politics and history do not interest him. He merely observes events. While he does wonder, “Was it really over for the two parties that have dominated French political life since the birth of the Fifth Republic?” (p. 60), he never takes a stand against them. He, who knows how to assign meaning to texts and connect authors, periods, and ideas, demonstrates impatience and impotence in the face of the concrete collapse of the democratic system. Consider this quote:

“I’ve always lived 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 form 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 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 live” (pg. 58)

# In his attempt to avoid getting involved and getting muddied by reality when he even flees to the provinces. The apathy and incompetency are evident in a scene that inverts moral hierarchies: 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.

In this fragment Francois employs the literary critic’s tools 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 analyses the generic techniques with which an impression of a historic moment is produced, as if all there is there are specific pragmatic poetics. As university professor Francois 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.

And another example:

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 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 […]. But in fact, the media’s attitude had changed over the last few months. […] They’d even stopped denouncing the “Cassandras”. In the end, the Cassandras had gone silent, too. People were sick of the subject […]. “What has to happen will happen” seemed to be the general feeling […]. The party was being held in the rue Chaptal, at the Museum of the Romantics, which had been rented for the occasion (pp. 41-42).

French newspapers discount the prophets of doom as “Cassandras”. François’colleagues address the issue strictly with reference to their expertise: the myth is inaccurately applied. They prove unable to separate the wheat from the chaff: rather than relating to the context in which the myth is being used—the “marginal” external events, such as the Muslim party seizing control of the state – they split hairs over the contemporary use of the myth. Their 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. Note that the occasion is held at the “Museum of Romantic Life”, ironically emphasizing academia’s disconnection from reality. In their indifference, (suggests Houellebecq), they become party to the usurpation and inversion of everything France stands for.

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

 “L’orage menaçait toujours; l’énorme nuage était maintenant suspendu, immobile, au-dessus du cortège. Au bout de quelques minutes je me lassai ; et me replongeai dans En rade.“ (120)

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.

# In another scene, François acknowledges that that chances are that the ----, “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. Again, the inversion of hierarchies is employed. The fateful, serious is juxtaposed with the trivial and the banal, with the latter overcoming. then 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.

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Thus, either by over- involvement or under involvement in politics, academia and the humanities in particular betray society. Society relies on academia for knowledge. If it is too deeply enmeshed in or completely indifferent to politics it betrays its duty. The French academic as portrayed in the novel does not feel obliged to anything, not even social democracy, which is on the verge of collapse. The very purpose of university studies is parodied, *ad absurdum* in the following quote:

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, you can even have a certain marginal value […] 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 – beside which, literature has always carried positive connotation in the world of luxury goods. (p. 8)

Houellebecq challenges us to think of higher education as a commodity that offers low return on investment. 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, implies the text, does nothing more than maintain itself without practical value.

Academia’s purpose is to produce knowledge and human resources capable of confronting humanity’s challenges and to be able to produce agents of

If all that interests Francois is his “friend” Huysmans then he and his colleagues fail to deliver, have no social impact and are incapable of being agents of change.

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**To conclude,** inseveral points along the narrative the academics’ disavowal of responsibility to society is referred to directly by the narrator, which goes hand in hand with the intellectual elite’s powerlessness and insignificance in the sociopolitical environment. “For the French, an intellectual didn’t have to be *responsible*, that wasn’t his job” (p. 221; italics in the original). Elsewhere the protagonist maintains in a moment of candid insight and self-appraisal: “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” (p. 147).

And in *Soumission*, The academic who refuses to be a political subject and rejects any autonomous agency outside his academic expertise, and the academic who self-identifies as first and foremost a political subject at the service of political ideologies, lead academia to cede its basic values, the values of the secular republic, the values from which the very notion of a university arose. Houellebecq’s case in point is the irresponsibility of academia to society.By overtly and directly politicizing universities and by alienating academia from society academia became both intellectually and politically insignificant.

The hyperbolic, grotesque, and polemic treatment of the sensitive target which is the academic world is used in the novel as a powerful tool for a critique of the intellectual elites. More than anything, *Soumission* voices the extent to which ambivalence and uncertainty concerning what academia actually is and what should be expected of it leads it to abandon its social responsibility, with dire consequences for the entire body politic.

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1. The novel also addresses Houellebecq’s recurring themes of the crisis besetting Western civilization, ~~“the brief illusion of an individual existence” (Houellebecq 2016, 103). I~~n particular the crisis of the subject and where communal ties are dissipating and intimate relationships are inflicted by individualism, consumerism, liberalism. how economic competition and market logic influence individuals’ relationship to society and their relationship to one another. See: (Novak-Lechevalier 2019, van der Goot 2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Or else ,multiple, contradictory, targets have been identified (see ---), very often these polemical readings are influenced by the public, media-staged personality of the author (Sturli 2017), [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. 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 que il existe encore ? ]…] je réduis donc mon personnage, je l’anéantis״ (Houellebecq 2020, 324). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. #  FNas Chantal Michel noticed, this is manifested already at the basic level of representation of a professor of literature who in his scholarly readings of Huysmans confuses the basic distinctions between the discrete conceptual entities of author, narrator and implied author (pg. ----).

 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. 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’ ---- where the final words are “bon à rien” (2018, 121). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. See also Edith Perry’s analysis (Perry 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. The college, university, or campus novel, is also referred to as Professorromane, university fiction, or academic novel. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. This and subsequent quotes are taken from - Reference to English translation-. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)