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

**Introduction**

Michel Houellebecq’s 2015 novel *Soumission* (*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 that traces the disintegration of the traditional political body in the face of the challenges currently facing France and the rest of Europe. As such, the novel raises such issues as immigration, multiculturalism, the dissolution of the nation state, the vision of the European Union, and the state of identity, ethnicity, and religion in France.[[1]](#footnote-2) The novel also touches on recurring themes that appear throughout Houellebecq’s body of 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 the influence of economic competition and market logic influence on individuals’ relationships to society and to one another (Novak-Lechevalier; van der Goot). Houellebecq’s ambiguous and controversial public posturing, which has earned him multiple accusations of Islamophobia, provides an additional context for interpreting the novel. Govand Khalid Azeez’s reading of *Submission*, for example, is largely based on Houellebecq’s media presence, paratextual and non-literary materials, and the blurred boundaries between the author and his characters (Azeez).[[2]](#footnote-3) Sana Alaya Seghair, whose article presents an overview of research that considers the novel Islamophobic, applies Bronner’s notions of the cognitive market of ideas, beliefs, knowledge, and hypotheses to contend that Houellebecq expresses *prêt-à-penser* ideas about Islam which adhere to the prevalent market of ideas (Seghair 248).[[3]](#footnote-4) Thus, Houellebecq’s intentional efforts to cultivate a literary position marked by opacity and equivocation, coupled with an evasiveness that serves to further mislead and confuse, have led to a widespread perception of the author as a provocative and confrontational figure (Betty 41).

*Submission* relates an alternative history of France in which the struggling Republican Party and the Socialists join forces with the Muslim Brotherhood party to defeat the radical right during the 2022 presidential elections. Their victory has shocking ramifications. 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 veils covering up their faces; 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.

In line with the novel’s satirical dimension, I propose another interpretation, one which reads *Submission* as an “academic novel” of sorts, wherein French academia is the focus of the critique. I propose that 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 Huysmans’s *En route*) “good for nothings” (Stein 1), that is, the intellectual elites who prove to be indifferent, inept, and disinterested in voicing an opinion.[[4]](#footnote-5) When they do speak out, it is only in the interests of their own personal objectives (Rousseau 121; Knausgaard; Michel; Morrey 349).[[5]](#footnote-6) Houellebecq satirizes the academic sphere as being impaired by a collective impracticality with respect to its fundamental societal mission and political role in times of social turmoil. *Soumission* manifests all the elements of an academic novel but is much more ambitious in its goals: Houellebecq’s denunciation of French academia illustrates a profound disconnection of French society from the values of the French Republic. Academics are thus portrayed as feeble cogs in a seemingly failing system,[[6]](#footnote-7) a symptom of French society’s disconnection from its roots. While they, of all people, should know and remember the details of French history and uphold the principles upon which French society was founded, they prove fatally myopic and fail to see the looming forest for the petty, self-interested trees.[[7]](#footnote-8)

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 this 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 the 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).[[8]](#footnote-9) As Henry F. Smith observes, François’s proposition “je ne suis *pour* rien de tout, tu le sais bien” (Houellebecq 41) ‘you know I am not *for* anything’ (Stein 28 [emphasis in the original])[[9]](#footnote-10) reflects the author’s nihilistic stance and narrative techniques (Smith 182).[[10]](#footnote-11)

In a recent open correspondence with Gilles Martin-Chauffier, Houellbecq directly addressed his rejection 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, 12)

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).[[11]](#footnote-12)

In *Submission*, morbid irony (Courteau 84) and cynicism are used to unsettle the reader, spur resistance, counteract interpretation, and elicit awareness of incongruities. For example, François treats the French political elections, the central object of discussion in the novel, as no more than a form of public entertainment, serving as a distraction for him from his existential mid-life crisis. His cynical remarks dismiss the elections’ social consequence and public value and cast doubts about the nature and efficacy of this social apparatus, as illustrated in these two examples:

1) J’aurai peut-être mieux fait de m’engager sur le plan politique, les militants des différents formations vivaient en cette période électorale des moments intenses alors que je m’étiolais, ce n’était pas contestable. ( Houellebecq 38)

I couldn’t get my hopes up. Maybe I should have gotten into politics. If you were a political activist, election season brought moments of intensity, whichever side you were on, and meanwhile here I was, inarguably withering away. (Stein 24)

2) En attendant la mort il me restait le *Journal des dix-neuvièmistes*, la prochaine reunion avait lieu dans moins d’une semaine. Il y avait la campagne électorale, aussi. Beaucoup d’hommes s’intéressent à la politique et à la guerre, mais j’appréciais peu ces sources de divertissement. (Houellebecq 50)

While I was waiting to die, I still had the *Journal of Nineteenth-Century Studies*. Its next meeting was in less than a week. Also, election day was coming up. Many men take an interest in politics and war, but these diversions never appealed to me. (Stein 37)

François’s narrative voice is also perhaps the most prominent structural device preventing the reader from identifying a fixed satirical target in the novel. 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,[[12]](#footnote-13) casting doubt on his propositions and undermining the stances he takes, since it is difficult to decipher the narrative distance between the implied author and the narrator, or the true disposition of the implied author against which that of the narrator can be evaluated. The unreliable François clearly violates many of today’s widely accepted cultural norms and values. Specifically and most conspicuously, his stance toward women, which he expresses candidly, is informed by a casual patriarchal sexism that most readers would deem categorically unacceptable: “En réalité je n’ai jamais été persuadé que ce soit une si bonne idée que les femmes puissent voter, suivre les mêmes études que les hommes, accéder au mêmes professions, etc. Enfin on s’y est habitué, mais est-ce que c’est une bonne idée, au fond?” (Houellebecq 41) ‘I’ve never really been convinced that it was a good idea for women to get the vote, study the same things as men, go into the same professions, et cetera. I mean, we’re used to it now—but was it really a good idea’ (Stein 28).

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), or an intentional attempt to provoke by engaging in unequivocally problematic conduct. By rendering François ethically dubious, Houellebecq undermines his narrator’s reliability. In parallel, the credibility of French society is compromised by 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, in any event, this same liberal elite never did live up to its self-proclaimed respect for women.

Hence, as a satirical depiction of contemporary France, *Submission* intends to dismantle, unmask, and disturb (Scurati 170–71; 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.[[13]](#footnote-14) Academia is the unambiguous object of ridicule, the very social phenomenon the reader is being warned against. If satire offers a critique of 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.

***Submission* as an Academic Novel**

The academic novel[[14]](#footnote-15) 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 their disconnection from the entirety of reality and everyday existence beyond campus life. Recognized in British and American literature as a subgenre of contemporary fiction, the academic novel investigates ethical and philosophical questions endemic in the academic setting as well as shifts of thematic emphasis experienced over the years. Attentive to its temporal context, it constantly represents the most contemporary headlines of higher education, from class and political infighting to feminism, political correctness, identity politics, and multiculturalism (Showalter). In *Soumission*’ case, its bind with society.

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 engage in intellectual discourse with their colleagues, but at the same time must compete against one another. And the fact that the quality of one’s research and one’s scholarly productivity do not necessarily guarantee professional success breeds ruthless competition and interpersonal conflict, which are compounded by fundamental inequalities. Hence, the politics of exclusion, or the perpetual threat of being removed from the community, features extensively in academic novels, driven by the constant fear of failing to secure a tenured post or promotion (Womack 329–40; Showalter 3–5).

The authors of academic novels are often university professors themselves, but these authors may well be writers who are not part of the academic community. Regardless, major academic novels use the genre to explore matters that extend beyond the boundaries of the campus and the parody of the academic world (Showalter; Womack). 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, adhering to the general assumptions and conventions of the genre. The setting and context in which the events unfold is typical of the genre and is foregrounded at the charged points at the beginning and end of the novel. The first chapter chronicles the milestones in François’s academic career from its inception, while the last chapter details his opportunity to revive his career at the Sorbonne after converting to Islam. The university serves as the primary locus of attention and intention, with the campus environment the novel’s milieu, both geographically and conceptually. Throughout, Houellebecq refers to several questions revolving around 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 care whether or not they find his lectures interesting. As he wonders while leaving his class one day, “(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?)”[[15]](#footnote-16) (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 looming issue. 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:

[O]n 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 enviable 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 contemporary academia reality, namely global economic downturns and budgetary cuts, as well as growing social divides on campus and the increasingly extreme nature 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. As will be shown, the novel circumscribes, complicates, and reexamines the place of academia and its relation to political trends and upheavals; this it does through a series of scenes which reiterate the ironic notion that “que l’histoire politique puisse jouer un role dans ma propre vie continuait à me déconcerter, et à me répugner un peu” (Houellebecq116) ‘The idea that political history could play any part in my own life was still disconcerting and slightly repellent’ (Stein 92). It thus raises the question of academic responsibility toward society, especially in times of crisis. Evidently, the novel’s ‘Republic of Science’[[16]](#footnote-17) ignores political reality even when the latter encroaches upon its hallowed halls of learning. The contrast between 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, emphasizing their dissimilarities. 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 61)

By comparing the discerning students with the unperceptive professors, the narrator exposes the latter’s parochial, sectarian motivations. Not only are the professors indifferent and complacent about the political consequences of the situation, but their concerns are limited to their own egocentric world, in which 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) ‘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.’[[17]](#footnote-18)

As an academic novel, *Submission* reexamines the humanities’ responsibility and commitment to society, as well as their complex relationship with national politics. In this way, Houellebecq challenges his readers to question some of the basic concepts and premises that shape today’s academic environment. Naturally, academia is susceptible to off-campus politicization, since, as discussed, irrespective of its elevated status, it is a sphere dominated by high-stakes competition with colleagues struggling for success. In a fundamentally unequal space, in which the quality of one’s scholarship is not always the decisive factor, joining in on political trends is a way to secure status and promotion. Granted, in examining the role of academia, Houellebecq leads us in two different directions. On the one hand, academia is over-involved in external national politics in terms of the influence the latter has on research and education. On the other hand, it is under-involved in local political life, which amounts to the ivory tower disengaging from the teeming reality below it. Both have grave consequences in terms of social irresponsibility and of the state’s investments ultimately yielding unfavorable results.

**Over-involvement**

The flagrant politicization of academia is embodied by the academic who serves political interests or seeks promotion by associating with those enjoying money and power. Such academics are “motivated less by faith and service than by ambition and the longing for power” (Showalter 119). François himself evinces 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 une 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, emphasis added)

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 promoting Islamic politics, Rediger is not only granted a professorship butisalso 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 is accompanied by inaccuracies in his research. As he 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 in the effort 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 considerable bearing on research and teaching. The quality of academic research drops, and the professors disengage even more 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, 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 no longer carries the prestige it once did, but makes a promise: “[…] 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 202). In essence, Rediger wants François to serve as the crumbling university’s window dressing; by liberating François from his obligation to the students, Rediger is thus relieving François of his responsibility to society. Consequently, responsible scientific work is left to François’ colleagues only (a limited readership by definition), while ideas that are allowed to shape society are disseminated and popularized by less responsible academics, as evidenced by Rediger’s book on Islam, *Dix questions sur l'islam*.

University administrators are quick to adopt national political trends, ostensibly for the benefit of their institutions but admittedly at the expense of specific student populations:

D’après Steve, un accord avait d’ailleurs été conclu entre les mouvements des jeunes Salafistes et les autorités universitaires, il en voyait preuve que les voyous et les dealers avaient complètement disparu, depuis deux ans déjà, des abords de la fac. L’accord comportait-il une clause interdisant l’accès de la fac aux organisations juives? […] l’Union des étudiants juifs de France n’était plus représentée, depuis la dernière rentrée, sur aucun campus de la région parisienne, alors que la section jeunesse de la Fraternité musulmane avait, un peu partout, multiplié ses antennes. (Houellebecq 34)

According to Steve, an agreement had been struck between the young Salafists and the administration. All of a sudden, two years ago, the hoodlums and dealers had all vanished from the neighborhood. Supposedly that was the proof. Had this agreement included a clause banning Jewish organizations from campus? […] as of last fall, the Jewish Students Union had no representatives on any Paris campus, while the youth division of the Muslim Brotherhood had opened new branches here and there, across the city. (Stein 21)

**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 roiling real world outside its ramparts. 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. Although he does wonder whether it was really the end for the two parties that had dominated French political life since the Fifth Republic, 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)

The irony in this fragment is that François employs the tools of the literary critic to relate to election night only to miss the picture altogether. In a *reductio ad absurdum*, instead of addressing the content of election night with the weighty issues at stake, the elections represent for the narrator a genre of television programming with a distinct narrative structure. Hence, François 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 exhibits a lack of interest in reality; consequently, 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, but does not flinch: “Après une brève hésitation, je pris dans les rayonnages un sandwich thon crudités, une bière sans alcool et le guide Michelin” (Houellebecq 129) ‘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). The corpse failing to elicit any further attention or action while the protagonist hesitates due solely to his inability to pay in the absence of a cash register or a cashier to take his money is a satirical hyperbolic subversion accentuating societal aversion. 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 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, as the Muslim party is seizing 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 their preference to immerse themselves in more comfortable epochs. In hyper-inflating and caricaturizing the disengaged academics, Houellebecq suggests that 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 important enough to make it worth the effort of watching 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.

**Academia’s betrayal of duty**

Thus, through either over-involvement or under-involvement in politics, academia—the humanities, in particular—betrays 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 we 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. Houellebecq thus challenges us to think of higher education as a commodity that offers a low return on investment. If all that interests François is his “friend” Huysmans, then he and his colleagues fail to fulfill the promise with which they have been entrusted: they have no social impact and are incapable of being agents of change. At several points along the narrative, François refers directly to how the academics of his milieu disavow their responsibility to society, which goes in tandem 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).

The last sentence of the novel underpins the novel’s satirical target; François tells us that if he chooses to return to university and continue with his academic work, “je n’aurais rien à regretter” (Houellebecq 300) ‘I would have nothing to mourn’ (Stein 246). Written entirely in the present conditional tense, the last segment relates how the professor willfully agrees to succumb to the new order which is aimed by definition at restricting academic work and circumscribing scientific outcomes. In order to secure his return to academia Francois must convert to Islam—this is a prerequisite:

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 fermée 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.[[18]](#footnote-19) The professor being reincarnated as a Muslim brother embodies the currents that run contrary to each other, the over- and under-involvement: with his conversion, François transitions from the under-involved academic to the over-involved politicized one. Nonetheless, the use of the conditional or hypothetical mode in the passage quoted above emphasizes the novel’s ambivalence. While the ceremony itself would be a seal of unequivocal, institutional affirmation, the grammatical structure of the passage betrays uncertainty and equivocation, a final satirical note that does not quite resolve into any positive statement.[[19]](#footnote-20)

In *Submission*, academia is selected as the target of a series of situational and essential stable ironies, that demonstrate how the self-absorbed academic succumbs to the stripping of the basic values of the secular republic. The incorporation of the academic novel genre, along with its acerbic tone and satirical inclination, accentuates the victims of the satire and provides a setting for inquiries and provocations as to the ramifications of an elite that at times of ambivalence and uncertainty abandons its social responsibilities, with dire consequences for the entire body politic. The academics who refuse to be political subjects and reject autonomous agency outside their academic expertise, on the one hand, or those who self-identify as political subjects exploiting political ideologies for self-promotion, are rendered intellectually insignificant and politically detrimental.

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1. See, for example, Brühwiler, Scurati. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. For more examples, see Meizoz, Harris, and Baroni. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. The claim that Houellebecq is an *écrivain médiatique* (Harris) or *transmédiatique* (Baroni) suggests that the full range of the author’s media presence is always taken into consideration by default, and that Houellbecq participates in the creation of his public image, transforming himself into the constructed role. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. 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’s *En Route*, where the final words are “bon à rien” (Rousseau 121). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. This opinion, voiced by literary critics, is also shared by the general political public. For example, Bruno Roger-Petit proposes that the novel about the abdication of responsibility and the stepping down of the elites, who have a propensity to collaborate with and submit to any power, provided it is legitimate (Roger-Petit). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. I am indebted to the anonymous reader of this manuscript for the this shrewd insightful and important remark. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. According to Alberto Spektorowski, this has to do with the loss of meaning, moral and spiritual, as suggested by another plotline in the novel. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. 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-9)
9. This and subsequent quotes are taken from the novel’s English translation by Lorin Stein (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. 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, “Entretien avec Marine” 324) ‘When you take everything away from someone, does he still exist? Therefore, I crush my character, I destroy him.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. My translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. 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-13)
13. For more on stable irony, see Booth (3-30). Booth contends that when irony is stable it consists of four components: it is preconceived and intended, it is covert and calls for reconstruction through close reading, it is secure once reconstructed; and, it is limited in scope and finite in explication. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Also referred to as Professorroman, university fiction, or campus fiction. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. The fact that he refers to students of a particular gender and religion, as opposed to the student body in general, is an example of why Houellebecq has been accused of Islamophobia not only in the media but in the legal sphere, with legal action taken against the author by Moslem leaders. The author himself added fuel to the flames of controversy in his 2022 interview with Michel Onfray in *Front Populaire*. In his most recent non-fiction publication, *Quelques mois dans ma vie*, Houellebecq recounts the aftermath of this legal procedure and contends that *Submission* is not at all Islamophobic but ambivalent to the very last detail (Houellebecq 2023, 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. See Polanyi’s 1962 article “The Republic of Science,” suggesting that “the community of scientists is organized in a way which resembles certain features of a body politic and words according to economic principles similar to those by which the production of material goods is regulated” (54). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Author’s translation. See also Edith Perry’s analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. See Walter Kerr, *Tragedy and Comedy*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. See Mănăstire on the relationship between the incipit and the excipit in Houellebecq. Mănăstire highlights the decisive role of the entrance into and exit from Houellebecq’s fictional universes in the codification and thematization of the narrative (127–145). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)