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Surplus consciousness

Houellebecq's novels of ideas

Martin Ryle

Michel Houellebecq's fiction is said to be selling better outside France than that of any French novelist since Camus. *Atomised* (1999) and *Platform* (2001), his two more recent novels, appeared in English within a year of their publication.¹ The comparison some reviews have drawn with Camus is of limited help in reading Houellebecq, but it opens questions about 1960s 'alienation', critical consciousness and complicity, which I discuss below. While divided about his literary importance, reviewers agree that Houellebecq, like Camus, is a novelist of ideas; and that his work is a polemical critique of contemporary French and European society. Some have placed him in a line of French reaction traceable back to Céline; others see him as denouncing global capitalism. These are not necessarily incompatible judgements.

Houellebecq's novels, though provocative rather than didactic, indeed foreground ideas. One need not make too much of the references to Comte in *Platform*, or the dismissive remarks on postwar French theory in *Atomised*.² More to the point, his fiction tests the implications of Foucauldian celebration of bodies and pleasures, and seems to dispense with the 'deep' subject along with its ethical and affective corollaries. 'Reflexive transcendence' has gone, Baudrillard declared long ago: 'today the scene and the mirror no longer exist; instead, there is a screen and network ... a non-reflecting surface, an immanent surface where operations unfold.... [The] psychological dimension has in a sense vanished.'³ Houellebecq's characterization mimics this depthlessness. The narrator of his first novel, *Whatever*, declares he will not 'charm [the reader] with subtle psychological observations', which are obsolescent in a world of media, gadgets, homogeneity (p. 14). 'It is wrong to pretend that human beings are unique, that they carry with them an irreducible individuality.... As often as not it is futile to wear yourself out trying to distinguish individual destinies and personalities', the narrator of *Platform* insists (p.

181). However, in reading the novels we may come to construe depthlessness not just as symptomatic condition, but as lack.

This ambiguous engagement with contemporary *idées reçues* is central to Houellebecq's project. 'Ideas' in the general sense of opinionated statements – about death, the body, feminism, 'race', culture, the sex industry, economics, sociobiology, designer goods – crowd his work. The narrative's background is generally given in a polemical or ironical tone:

It is interesting to note that the 'sexual revolution' is usually portrayed as a communist utopia, whereas in fact it was simply another stage in the rise of the individual. As the lovely phrase 'hearth and home' suggests, the couple and the family were to be the last bastion of primitive communism in a liberal society. The sexual revolution was to destroy the last unit separating the individual from the market. The destruction continues to this day. (*Atomised*, pp. 135f.)

A brochure in my hotel room gave me some information about the history of the resort, which was the product of a wonderful human adventure: that of Bertrand Le Moal, backpacker *avant la lettre* who, having fallen in love with this place, had 'laid down his pack' here at the end of the 60s. With furious energy, and the help of his Karen friends, little by little he had built this 'ecological paradise', which an international clientele could now enjoy. (*Platform*, p. 66)

The protagonists voice opinions constantly, in first-person narration, monologues and dialogues. Elsewhere, their taciturnity may issue an implied challenge: 'Usually, when I left the office, I'd take in a peepshow. It set me back fifty francs, maybe seventy if I was slow to ejaculate. Watching pussy in motion cleared my head' (*Platform*, p. 17). The perspectival, diachronic engagement specific to fiction-reading, based on a developing interpretation of character and of plot, is interrupted by demands for the kind of response proper

to journalism, polemic, critique: immediate, decontextualized political-ideological response. No doubt this strongly ideological colouring is what has led English reviewers to lament that Brits don't know how to produce that kind of novel. Houellebecq makes no show of cordoning the literary-aesthetic off from other discourses: rather than seeking the conscious aesthetic difference of the modernist artwork, he presses fiction up against neighbouring kinds of writing, much as nineteenth-century realists did.

In particular, in Houellebecq writer and reader are involved in unpleasant sexual and 'racial' discourses. Quasi-pornographic representation, normalized as the everyday consciousness of the protagonists, invades the text in *Atomised* and especially in *Platform*. Houellebecq was unsuccessfully charged with *provocation à la haine* (incitement to hatred) for derogatory comments on Islam made in an interview (he called it 'the dumbest religion'), and his novels press heavily on questions of religious ethnicity and represent scenes of actual and imagined interracial violence.⁴

In staging these themes, Houellebecq risks the charge of complicity. No implied author can be located, aloof from the narration, guiding our responses. Therefore we cannot exonerate Houellebecq from the charge of writing racist and misogynistic discourses from which he never clearly dissociates himself. He has made flippant, offensive comments on some issues his work raises, though these are probably best regarded as provocations.⁵ His protagonists can be seen as representative types, 'figures ... à la fois banales et monstrueuses' invented to typify contemporary attitudes and behaviours (to quote a review in *L'Humanité*). They may for all that be close to the biographical Houellebecq.⁶ Nothing in this exempts the reader from making judgements: on the contrary, it is by goading us to judge for ourselves that the novels sustain moral-political tension and produce an unsettled experience of reading. The view that Houellebecq's work is 'a mirror to the "Who cares?" attitudes of late post-modernism'⁷ simplistically mistakes the anomic and cynical attitudes sometimes struck by his protagonists (and by their author) for the final effect of his books on an attentive reader.

Fredric Jameson has lamented that writers, critics and readers are now all 'deeply immersed in post-modernist space', so that 'distance in general (including "critical distance" in particular)' has been abolished. Jameson has invoked, as antidote to this loss, some 'as yet unimaginable new mode of representing' that would allow us to map our political co-ordinates again.⁸ Houellebecq's fiction makes no show of any-

thing 'unimaginable', if by that term we understand some immediately striking aesthetic-formal innovation; it reads easily, draws on everyday journalistic and anecdotal styles, depends on straightforward narrative development. It is quite distinct from that line of postwar French neo-avant-garde theory and writing that has sustained a link with modernism. But Houellebecq has produced something 'new', along Jameson's map-making lines. They are not 'postmodern fictions' in the terms developed by literary theorists, but his novels, in their ambiguous engagement with contemporary subjectivity and culture, challenge us to decide whether they – and we – are merely 'immersed' in this lifeworld or 'distanced' from it.

Platform, especially, insists on its subjects' historical and geographical location as members of a relatively privileged class in the European metropolis. This class imagines itself as 'universal', in the sense that its 'values' are sure to conquer and absorb – 'culturally', of course – whatever resistance they encounter travelling the world. Meanwhile, however, its self-reproduction depends on globalized material inequality. Tourism exactly represents this contradiction: beach tourism, adventure tourism, eco-tourism, sex tourism. Babette and Léa, fellow-tourists in Thailand with the narrator of *Platform*, work for a PR agency in the Île-de-France. He finds out their salary, and comments to the reader that though it might be better, it is still 'pretty good. About twenty-five times the salary of a metalworker in Surat Thani [in Thailand]. Economics is a mystery' (p. 83). *Platform* centres on tourism managed and marketed from Paris: Paris, with its particularities, but Paris as exemplary metropolis – with its own peripheral zone, of course: the salaried employees of the Aurore group are advised to travel home by taxi if they have to work late. The area where the head office is located is dangerous, the grounds are patrolled by private security guards (p. 198). Surat Thani, meanwhile, with its 42,000 inhabitants, 'is distinguished, according to the guidebooks, by the fact that it is of no interest whatever' (p. 82).

Beyond its specifically French dimensions, Houellebecq's work speaks to these more generally European and 'Western' contexts, social and literary-theoretical. In what follows, I take up the comparison with Camus and the relation between protagonists, society and ideas. I then consider the uses of quasi-pornography and what this means for the subject; and assess what 'critical distance' Houellebecq establishes vis-à-vis the representations of interracial violence that recur in his writing. I conclude by situating *Platform* in relation to some general discussions of fiction, modernism and critique.

Outsider?

'Father died last year'; 'Mother died yesterday' – the opening of *Platform* echoes that of *L'Étranger* (*The Outsider*), the novel of Camus which Houellebecq's work might seem most to resemble.⁹ Both protagonists, Camus's Meursault and Houellebecq's Michel Renault, are also the narrators, so the relation we form with them will modify our interpretation of the texts.¹⁰ At the outset, we may note that neither shows what is thought of as a proper response to death: is this a personal failing, or a challenge to hypocritical bourgeois mores?

Camus's book seeks to sustain the latter reading. Meursault's relation to the society he lives in becomes explicitly antagonistic. His failure to display signs of grief at the funeral is read, he later discovers, as evidence of 'great callousness'. We are to read it otherwise, as the sign of authenticity. Believing he has been condemned to death, not for killing an unnamed Arab in a beach fight, but because he has refused to observe conventional etiquette, Meursault hopes to be greeted, going to the scaffold, with 'howls of execration' from the crowd.¹¹ We may well reject the romantic-egotistical presuppositions of that attitude, as René Girard does in a stringent analysis.¹² However, this is to refuse the principle on which the novel offers itself to be read. Meursault's 'outsiderly' demeanour must be taken to imply some radical if never-formulated critique. This was certainly the basis of the reputation *The Outsider* gained in Britain during the 1960s, where Colin Wilson's much-discussed 1956 book of the same title accorded an important place to it and helped pave the way for its many Penguin printings in the subsequent decade. 'The Outsider' is the man (Wilson's outsiders are always men) who 'cannot accept life as it is', who 'sees "too deep and too much"', and who is 'cut off from other people by an intelligence which ruthlessly destroys their values'.¹³

Michel Renault, like Meursault, declines to view the body; he too turns aside from death. *Platform* tells us less about the funeral than about what Renault watches afterwards on his dead father's '32-inch Sony widescreen with surround sound and an integrated DVD player': *Xena, Warrior Princess*; a quiz show; a made-for-TV film, with period-pastoral sex; and, as he dozes off, a programme about 'silurids – huge fish with no scales which had become common in French rivers as a result of global warming' (pp. 3–10). Nothing suggests our hero's comportment is found eccentric. He makes 'an excellent impression' at the ceremony, with his habitual sober dress and 'sullen expression', his head 'bowed a little to listen to a Christian funeral-

hymn medley' (p. 5). All this offers no reason to think performance and authenticity are opposed. A state of indifference is mirrored in performances nobody invests with much meaning. It is nevertheless still open to readers to feel there is something lacking, some moment of awe or of reflection, which death ought to evoke but which finds no register, subjective or ceremonial or discursive, in the chapter.

Here, then, if there is a critique of 'society' it must also call in question the behaviour and attitudes of the protagonist, who is by no means the Camusian outsider-as-dissident. And if there is such a critique, the reader has to produce it, and take responsibility for it, without overt prompting or support in the text. We will be in the same position when we confront later behaviours and opinions: Renault's visits to Thai prostitutes; his affair in Paris with Valérie and the account given of their sexual pleasures and preferences; and, in the novel's major narrative development, the couple's participation in the development of 'friendly tourism'. This is the euphemism for a new project in which dealings between European visitors and local people willing to sell sex will be facilitated rather than merely condoned by the tour operators. Valérie and her colleague Jean-Yves, newly headhunted for the Aurore group, set up and lead the project. Renault returns to Thailand with them to sample the first resort in the new chain, which is murderously attacked by turbaned bombers and gunmen in the book's climax.

How are we to read Renault, through whom we must read all this? The '1960s' figuration, Renault as an outsider who sees through bourgeois hypocrisy, is certainly untenable. To invert this, to read him as a moral-political reprobate and a complicit apologist for whatever he recounts (as we may read Michel in *Whatever* and Bruno Clément in *Atomised*), is oversimple: he wittily criticizes many aspects of the world he describes. On the questions of sexuality, selfhood and the marketable body, it is a certain blankness in his narration, rather than any explicit commentary, that we have to interpret.

In any case, the autonomy of 'opinions' tends to be undermined by the emphasis placed on character as produced in a matrix of determinations: 'The three of us' – Jean-Yves, Valérie and Renault – 'were caught up in a social system like insects in a block of amber' (p. 165). Whether we hold people accountable for opinions presented as circumstantially determined is something the reader must decide (and this, of course, involves a choice between humanist and anti-humanist understandings of the subject). In all the novels, life-situations are summed up with less emphasis on

individualizing traits than on socio-economic constraints and opportunities. Even exceptional moments of social mobility are historically contingent. 'Martin Ceccaldi's singular destiny was entirely symptomatic of the role played by secularism, throughout the Third Republic, in integrating citizens into French society and promoting technological progress. His teacher quickly realised that he was an exceptional pupil' (*Atomised*, p. 25).

The effect is of a positivistic determinism. (This may be one reason for the novel's references to Comte.) Once the subject acquiesces in the truth of this 'determination', and concedes, too willingly, that personal dispositions and sentiments are beyond the self's control, the result is self-reflexive irony. One example. Renault, recently moved to Chinatown, has been wondering whether to buy a gun:

Curiously, I was not afraid for my own sake. It's true I had very little contact with the barbarian hordes, except perhaps occasionally at lunchtime when I went for a walk around the Forum des Halles, where the subtle infiltration of the security forces... eliminated all danger, in theory. So I wandered casually through the reassuring topography of uniforms; I felt as though I was in Thoiry safari park. In the absence of the forces of law and order, I knew, I would be easy prey, though of little interest; very conventional, my middle-management uniform had little to tempt them. For my part, I felt no attraction for ... the *dangerous classes*; I didn't understand them, and made no attempt to do so. I didn't sympathise with their passions nor with their values. For myself, I wouldn't have lifted a finger to own a Rolex, a pair of Nikes or a BMW Z3; in fact, I had never succeeded in identifying the slightest difference between designer goods and non-designer goods. In the eyes of the world, I was clearly wrong.... Through my blindness, however involuntary, I set myself apart from a living human reality powerful enough to incite both devotion and crime. (pp. 270f.)

The passage turns back, implicitly, on itself. Its self-awareness is impeccably sophisticated; its 'self-criticism' ('very little contact with the barbarian hordes', 'I set myself apart from a living human reality') is ironic complacency. The knowledge of the 'outsider' was celebrated in the 1960s as 'alienation' – the term being used, in a sentimental lay understanding, to denote not subjection to material and ideological determination but a state of emancipated critical enlightenment. Believing oneself outside, one occupied an imaginary Archimedean point.¹⁴ Since then we have seen the destruction in theory of such humanistic positions. But once critical consciousness apprehends

the subject as fully embedded in the social, can it apprehend itself as anything but surplus consciousness, ineluctably produced, unable to effect anything? The question has particular implications for those who work, as Renault does, in the 'cultural sector'. The themes of determination and complicity arise in relation to the contested autonomy of the artwork, which depends on the idea that consciousness can transcend the determinations that it knows. Renault for his part states early in the novel, after sketching his day in the office where he organizes the financing of art shows: 'My conclusion, henceforth, is that art cannot change lives' (p. 16).

I shall return to this. Meanwhile, we should note that a novel confers dialogic power even on the most banal statement. Because they are acts of communication with a reader, the most blankly positivistic discourses tend to become self-subverting. Told that Michel Djerzinski 'ate a Monoprix ready-meal – monkfish in parsley sauce, from their Gourmet range' (*Atomised*, p. 14), we enter into an unspoken conversation (with the author, the narrator, the character, ourselves): on solitude and sociability, on how when a putatively complex need is met in this pre-packaged way part of its potential content is left unsatisfied, until perhaps the need shrinks. As Sartre noted in *Nausea*, telling a story imparts to every event, even the most unremarkable, the significance of its connection with an ending: nothing is 'superfluous', everything is 'a piece of information whose value we will understand later on'.¹⁵ Houellebecq, constantly interpolating ideas and opinions, provokes us to respond to these as valuable events and to produce our own commentary even on actions left without comment. The closed circuit of ironic complicity may be broken – as it may be merely extended – when readers reflect on whether their own forms of consciousness match those figured in the text.

Pornography and 'Islam'

It is part of the 'vanishing' of the 'psychological dimension' in *Platform* that the affair between Renault and Valérie, although Renault thinks of it as a love affair offering tenderness and intimacy, is represented largely through its bodily-sexual aspect, rendered more or less in the language of mainstream pornography: the language which in English is found in the 'confessions' pages of top-shelf mags – 'heterosexual', male-authored, relentlessly orgasmic, focused on physical impulses, movements and reactions.¹⁶ As time passes, Renault and Valérie, thanks partly to her obliging sense of 'the different things that keep male desire alive' (p.



207), go in for the kinds of scene canonical to porn. In Cuba, they pay a hotel chambermaid \$40 to join them in bed (pp. 212f.). Then comes partner-sharing in Paris *partouze* clubs, sex in public places (they visit an SM club, too, but this repels them). Perhaps a tenth of the novel consists of sex scenes; the formulaic repetition-with-variation is again integral to the porn genre. The English paperback cover features a semi-artistic semi-nude. Renault (p. 89) reminds readers that a man can jerk off to a book (he makes do with a scene in John Grisham's *The Firm*). Its putative sexiness is part of the marketing, and readability, of *Platform*.

However, this does not make the novel pornographic. The text incorporates the language of porn directly, whenever sexual activity is represented, as the way the narrator-protagonist sees things: it is not bracketed off as a sub-discourse, as commonly happens when literary novelists allude to it (for example, in Martin Amis's *London Fields*). Houellebecq ignores the supposed boundary between literature and pornography which has helped sustain the notion that porn is marginal, even transgressive, despite its cultural and economic centrality in societies like ours. In this novelistic context, the quasi-pornographic itself, rather than what it represents, eventually becomes the object of representation. Juxtaposed directly with other kinds of writing, spoken by a literary-fictional rather than pornographic subject, the language of porn in *Platform* speaks out its own terms: its intolerance of bodily ageing and imperfection, its censorship of whatever thoughts and feelings might trouble bodily pleasure, the hostility which is the obverse of its adoring fetishization. 'She had beautiful breasts, the slut, clearly visible under her see-through top ... I

stared attentively at the two sluts so I could forget them forever' (pp. 39f.). It speaks of its own linguistic poverty, its ignorance of the erotic.

Platform makes us respond to porn not just as language of representation, but as a discourse forming sexualities and selves. It presents us with a happy couple ('We could fuck with love': p. 164) who live according to its formulae. Its claim to historical representativeness depends on us seeing Renault and Valérie as 'typical', in Lukács's sense: 'a character is typical ... when his innermost being is determined by objective forces at work in society'.¹⁷ Their sexual life, while unusual, is that of a certain fashionable elite; there is a sufficient basis of realism for the relationship to stand metonymically as an image of contemporary metropolitan life. Beyond that, their deliciously anonymous pleasures are a figure, invoking metaphorically all those widely diffused pleasure-practices which involve acceptance of or preference for the solipsistic, the anonymous, the momentary. This is a dance of bodies and pleasures for a subject conceived as two-dimensional 'screen' or 'network', without the 'psychological dimension'. Sex tourism is emblematic of how such forms of metropolitan pleasure are becoming or may become hegemonic everywhere.

The reader is ultimately prompted, in my judgement, to see the union of Valérie and Renault as 'banal and monstrous'. She attracts him because of her self-abnegating complaisance: nothing that happens later need modify his initial dismissive assessment that she has 'a sort of canine docility ... she was just submissive *in general*, and maybe just ready to look for a new master' (pp. 42f.). The couple's relation, even if we grant its happiness, amounts to a ruthless

(though, again, ‘typical’) *égoïsme à deux*: sex and food and tourism fill what time is left over from well-paid, intensive bureaucratic–entrepreneurial work. Almost the last thought Renault has about Valérie is that she is ‘a good predator ... and she had chosen me to share her lair’ (p. 329).

We may ask whether the subject enjoying just these pleasures should be understood in terms of lack or default, as well as happiness and privilege. We may ask if other kinds of relationship are preferable, and on what grounds. But here we are caught between incompatible discourses, both useless: the barely visible ghost of a ‘moral’ tradition originating in Catholic familism (this ghost stalks more visibly through certain pages of *Atomised*) and the language that dwells exclusively on bodily surfaces and performances. On questions of virtue, the good life, self-realization, the first says what no one believes any more. The second offers



only ‘the humanist proposition: striving to maximise individual pleasure without causing suffering to another’ (*Atomised*, p. 262) – which can tell us nothing about what ‘pleasure’ is. If readers want to excogitate some third way, they are going to have to do it for themselves, starting from premisses that Houellebecq barely registers.

We may well resent the pressure to form judgements in the field of sexual practice, since reluctance to do so has been a defining trait of the intelligentsia formed by the 1960s. However, this reluctance has been in constant tension with another defining trait, namely a new political consciousness about gender relations. The moment which freed sexualities from old judgemental discourses also helped form the ‘second wave’ of feminism with its new forms of judgement. A humanist and existentialist feminism, reshaping gendered subjects in accordance with their own projects of reciprocity,

was one legacy of that moment, and provides one historical starting point for tracing a ‘third way’ between moralistic paternalism and solipsistic relativism. But Houellebecq’s characters register feminism (if they register it at all) as a moment in the past (‘1968’), a spent moment. We live among its ‘last dismaying dregs’. Valérie, a successful professional, hardly refers to feminism.¹⁸

Platform, like *Atomised*, provokes judgements just because its sexual narration – blankly pornographic, or blankly positivistic: ‘I took in a peepshow’ – ends up foregrounding its own absence of ethical and affective terms. In the books’ narrative development and their framework of ideas ‘1968’ is linked to the contemporary moment of peepshows, sex clubs, Internet contacts, globalized sex tourism. The middle term is not the new ethical–political body which feminism failed to produce, but the body newly available to

pleasure, the body as a ‘surface’ or ‘screen’. To this, no inner being corresponds or should be made to correspond. To make one’s sexual body a commodity is then merely a rational choice – as Valérie points out, the \$40 she gives the hotel chambermaid in Cuba is for the maid equivalent to a month’s pay (p. 213); and such a choice involves nothing different in principle from other market exchanges.

‘Therefore,’ I went on, ‘you have several hundred million Westerners who have everything

they want but no longer manage to obtain sexual satisfaction. ... On the other hand, you have several billion people who have nothing, who are starving, who die young ... and who have nothing to sell except their bodies and their unspoiled sexuality. It’s simple, really simple to understand: it’s an ideal trading opportunity.’ (p. 242)

In ending *Platform* with the attack by Islamic terrorists, Houellebecq anticipated 11 September 2001 and the Bali nightclub bombing, which happened after it appeared. The suggestion that violent political Islam is now global capitalism’s main antagonist has become a commonplace. Houellebecq’s representation of Islam traces this depressing global battle line into the metropolitan territory of France (which has the highest Muslim population in Europe, both absolutely and proportionally).¹⁹ His books reveal, partly through their own complicity in it, the outline of a new ‘orientalism’,

based no longer on colonial power–knowledge but on postcolonial metropolitan ignorance and fantasy. The complicity needs to be emphasized and criticized. In France, Houellebecq has been made to leave the leftist ‘Perpendiculaire’ writers’ group that he helped found. On the other hand, the review in *L’Humanité* that praised *Platform* for its critical force, ‘rare in recent French fiction’, made no suggestion whatever that its representations of Islam might be thought troubling. Few Anglophone reviewers have made as much as they should have of this, either.²⁰

There are incidents, real and fantasized, of racial violence and abuse in the first two novels. The protagonist of *Whatever* tries to persuade a colleague to stab a black youth who has gone to the beach with a white girl. He listens to but does not comment on a conversation about the bombing of a Parisian café by Arab terrorists (*Whatever*, pp. 16–20, 19ff.). Bruno, in *Atomised*, masturbates in front of a ‘pretty little Arab girl’ who is one of his pupils, and writes what he knows is racist propaganda (pp. 235–7). Both protagonists are presented as unbalanced, destructive individuals, compensating for their anxieties through displays of racialized resentment. Michel Renault, who in several places expresses crude anti-Islamic views, is, however, a more passive and less unequivocally negative figure than his predecessors.

More significantly, some of the authorial choices in *Platform* incorporate a hostile representation of Islam into the structure of the book. In all three novels, fantasies of racial violence are attributed to white Europeans, whereas acts of racial violence are committed by Arabs and Muslims; but this is of much greater significance in *Platform*, where terroristic killing does not remain on the periphery but engulfs the central characters. In *Platform*, ethnic hostility is no longer expressed only by the narrator–protagonist. Islamic culture is twice attacked in speeches by minor characters. An Egyptian geneticist makes a brief, otherwise unmotivated appearance to denounce Islam and monotheism, in terms close to those used by Houellebecq in the *Lire* interview (pp. 250f.). Near the start of the book, Aïcha, sister of the Arab youth arrested for killing Renault’s father, accuses her male relatives of being ‘stupid’: visiting Mecca has made her father intolerable, her brothers get drunk on pastis while posing as ‘guardians of the one true faith’ (p. 22). She is going to leave the family home and continue her nursing studies in Paris.

Aïcha, a young Muslim woman trying to escape patriarchal bondage, is the very same figure who is to be liberated by being banned from wearing the hijab

and assimilated to French secular society. The family configuration Houellebecq has chosen is calculated to enforce the claims of the French Republic as the standard-bearer of liberty, secular reason and women’s emancipation. If the issue is posed in these abstract terms – secular liberalism versus theocracy – plenty of us will, of course, side with the former. However, the abstraction represses, and is designed to repress, any reference to colonial history, specifically the Algerian war, where assimilation and metropolitan power were all too visibly linked in the formula: ‘Algerians’ must be French, and which disproved once again the idea that Europeans only ever dream of killing Arabs – or that they kill them like Meursault, ‘innocently’.²¹ Colonial history, which brought so many Arabs and Muslims to live in France, overdetermines the meaning of every sign of Islamic identity there today, and means that the abstract truth that religion is distinct from ‘race’ is concretely a half-truth at best. But none of this is even distantly alluded to in *Platform*. Instead, the author has produced a historically decontextualized trope, flattering to the self-image of *la patrie*.

Other aspects of *Platform* are less comforting to the good conscience of the metropolitan elite. The portrait of a privileged class immersed in but cut off from a world of violence and dispossession (‘no contact with the barbarian hordes’) is strengthened, rather than weakened, by the refusal to stage any humanistic and redemptive encounter with the ‘other’. We can trace this refusal or failure in the narrative line which seems to begin when Renault meets Aïcha. She has had ‘intimate relations’ with his father, which is why her brother killed him – probably inadvertently, going further than he had meant to. But Renault takes no interest in the trial, whose outcome we never learn (Camusian indifferentism is still in the background here). When she comes to collect her things from the house, Renault talks to her, but only about the quiz show he has been watching: ‘I’ve always admired [the host] Julien Lepers’, he tells her. ‘The contestants are human beings to him’ (pp. 6f.). Later they meet briefly again. Renault feels ‘a certain attraction to Muslim vaginas’, and congratulates himself, on no discernible grounds, for having made ‘a connection’ in their brief talk (pp. 21f.). Later still, her name is mentioned a last time when he dreams he is fucking on the Métro with ‘an Arab girl... She didn’t look anything like Aïcha, at least I don’t think so’ (p. 83). This scene is darkly echoed in a later incident when a colleague of Valérie is viciously raped by a gang, probably West Indian, on the Métro (p. 197). The implication at the personal level is plain enough: that Renault is incapable of

making any real 'connection'. Thematically, the rape connects with numerous fleeting references to the inequality, dispossession and danger at the heart of the metropolis, and then connects at another level to the novel's major theme: that 'consensual' prostitution in the tourist periphery, where Europeans live out sex fantasies and enjoy the exotic 'other', is part of that same system of inequality, against which brutal violence is a predictable protest.

Complicity, critical distance, 'culture'

Jameson asked a dozen years ago whether postmodern culture necessarily lacked critical distance. Referring back to a modernism still able to resist incorporation, still endowed with potential critical alterity, he wondered what space remained for resistance, in the subject or the cultural sphere. This led him to speculate about an 'unimaginable' new political and pedagogical art, 'which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system'.²²

Critical definitions and discussions of the postmodern novel have stressed its ludic, metafictional and para-historiographical character.²³ The histories (re)written by canonical postmodern fictions are often imaginary, speaking in the 'heteroglot' voices suppressed or marginalized in dominant literary and historiographical forms. This, evidently, is one way to attempt the kind of 'placing' and mapping that Jameson advocates. In these terms, Houellebecq's work is not an example of 'postmodern fiction' any more than of modernist distance through difficulty. It uses realist means, resorting neither to metafictional play nor to pastiche, and represents dominant, metropolitan subjects. However, there is every reason for continuing to engage with the dominant: as Bryan Palmer has insisted, contra Robert Young, 'the "West," as the site of capitalism's late twentieth-century power, is not, in any meaningful sense, in the throes of dissolution.'²⁴ Houellebecq in his critique of the European 'West' says very little directly about the sufferings or aspirations of the marginalized (and certainly does not produce the optimistic–progressive image of 'inclusiveness' favoured by British arts and cultural policy). His focus is on the pleasurable lives of well-off contemporary Europeans (who include most of his likely readers), our opportunities and capacities for pleasure being foregrounded as what is most historically 'typical' about us. Yet despite and because of this focus, his work produces a highly problematic image of the contemporary. Its 'map' of negativity, decadence and violence can be made to emerge, by way of the reader's

labour of critique, from a discourse which in itself seems to lack any 'distance'.

I have argued that in Houellebecq critique always depends on the reader, a reader 'produced' by the text's provocations and silences, but who brings to bear political and ethical sensibilities which are never explicitly registered there. 'Culture' without its readers, as a delimited sphere, as an object of policy on a par, say, with sport, as a fetishized space for the 'creative', cannot have alterity or distance. The bureaucratic development of the 'cultural sector' is an important sub-theme in *Platform*. Renault describes various artworks he has had to deal with in his job: photos of police brutality in the suburbs ('the artist had favoured a "fun" approach rather than the social critique you'd expect'), a rubber belt embossed with three-dimensional casts of the artist's clitoris (pp. 16f., 302f.). He is unconvinced, and so are we, that putting reality-images in brackets like this can in itself create any critical distance. In his interview with Captain Chaumont of the Cherbourg police, Renault finds himself 'completely desperate, overcome with shame' when asked to describe his work. However, Chaumont responds with 'compassion tinged with seriousness'. 'He had an awareness of the existence of the cultural sector, a vague but definite awareness. He must have had to meet people from all walks of life in his profession; no area of society could be completely alien to him' (pp. 12f.). Again, this highlights the discrete location of 'culture' – its institutionalization, after modernism, as an administrative 'sphere' – to suggest how just this separation makes it ineffectual.

These witty passages demonstrate that the novel, in its dialectical complexity, can get above the closed circuit of 'culture' by reflecting on it. However, they can then only show how those in the 'cultural sector' (the readers of literary novels, as well as their writers) are able to see their own backs in the mirror with the help of another mirror. Metacultural reflections can say nothing but this expected last word on 'culture'. On the largest themes of *Platform*, the final reference is not to culture but to politics: to the social and political interventions which might make a difference to the inequality and violence that are the context of our pleasures. Just before the attack on the resort hotel, Renault reflects as follows:

I tasted a spoonful of curried chicken with green peppers; as it happened, I could imagine doing something similar with mangoes. Jean-Yves nodded thoughtfully. I looked at Valérie: she was a good predator ... and she had invited me to share her lair... According to Immanuel Kant, human dignity consists in not accepting to be subject to laws

except inasmuch as one can simultaneously consider oneself a legislator; never had such a bizarre fantasy crossed my mind. Not only did I not vote, but I had never considered elections as anything more than excellent television shows.... I was quite happy to delegate whatever powers I had. In my youth, I had encountered militants, who considered it necessary to force society to evolve in this or that direction. ... What did I, for my part, have to reproach the West for? Not much... (*Platform*, pp. 329f.)²⁵

Such a subject claims he refuses to consider involving himself, even minimally, in the political practice to which ideas of critical alterity, of the autonomy of the aesthetic, ultimately refer. Can anyone as sophisticated as Renault, anyone whose sensibilities are informed by Kant, also be the subject who opts out, who is seduced by pleasure into going along with things as they are, who is glad therefore to be able to figure the self as a fly in amber? The 'heightened sense of our place in the global system' which we can elicit from Houellebecq's novels presses us to recognize that questions of distance, autonomy and alterity have in the end to be posed not of 'culture' but of its readers.

Notes

1. I cite English translations of Houellebecq's novels, in paperback editions, giving page numbers in the text. *Atomised* (Vintage, London, 2003; Heinemann, London, 2000), trans. Frank Wynne, was originally published as *Les particules élémentaires* (Paris, 1999). *Platform* (Vintage, London, 2003; Heinemann, London, 2002), trans. Frank Wynne, first appeared as *Plateforme* (Paris, 2001). *Whatever* was published by Serpent's Tail, London, in 1998, trans. Paul Hammond; the French original, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, was published in Paris in 1994. An earlier version of some material later incorporated into *Platform* has been published under the title *Lanzarote*. Many websites are devoted to Houellebecq, whose personal site is www.houellebecq.info. Via these, I have accessed (on various dates in January and February 2004) the book reviews and other information cited here. Where applicable I give references to original printed sources. For a listing of reviews of *Atomised* and *Platform*, with links to many of the texts, see respectively www.complete-review.com/reviews/houelbqm/parthelem.htm and www.complete-review.com/reviews/houelbqm/platform.htm.
2. 'The global ridicule inspired by the works of Foucault, Lacan, Derrida and Deleuze, after decades of reverence, far from leaving the field clear for new ideas, simply heaped contempt on all those who were active in "human sciences"', *Atomised*, p. 376. For references to Comte in *Platform*, see pp. 178, 182f., 318. Houellebecq has edited and discussed Comte's work (and that of Schopenhauer).
3. Jean Baudrillard, 'The Ecstasy of Communication', in Hal Foster, ed., *Postmodern Culture*, Pluto, London, 1985, pp. 126f.
4. Houellebecq's remarks were made in an interview in *Lire*, September 2001 (consulted 4 February 2004 at www.lire.fr/imprimer.asp?idc=37437). They were accom-

panied by rude remarks about monotheism generally. The case was brought by four French Muslim groups, including the mosques of Paris and Lyon, and was heard at the Palais de Justice on 17 September 2002. Acquittal, on 22 October, was on the grounds that criticism of a belief does not amount to incitement against its adherents; it was noted that Houellebecq was in no way associated with campaigns or polemics against Muslims as a group. The fullest narrative I have found is the polemically anti-clerical account at www.atheisme.org/houellebecq.html (consulted 4 February 2004). Salman Rushdie summarized the case against Houellebecq and wrote in his defence. See the *Guardian*, 28 September 2002.

5. The *Lire* interview includes a claim that prostitution, for instance in Thailand, is not a problem, and should be properly regulated by the state in France as it is in Germany and Holland.
6. Jean-Claude Lebrun, *L'Humanité*, 30 August 2001 (on *Plateforme*). Renault, says Lebrun, is 'one of those remarkable figures, at once banal and monstrous, that novelists invent in order to sum up in human form the distinctive traits of an epoch'. Comparing Houellebecq with Balzac, from whose *Père Goriot* the epigraph to *Platform* is drawn, he dismisses the idea that Renault is the author's double or representative. Lebrun concludes that the novel is an unusually radical attack on the globalized market. Biographical information from various of the sources I cite above indicates significant parallels between the author's life and that of his protagonists (not that this licenses reductive readings of the fiction).
7. In Christopher Hitchens's review, 'Holy Writ', *Atlantic Monthly*, April 2003.
8. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London and New York, 1991, pp. 48, 54.
9. Albert Camus, *L'Étranger* (1942), trans. Stuart Gilbert as *The Outsider*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1969, p. 13; *Platform*, p. 3. Some reviews note this echo, but none that I have seen remarks on the parallel centrality of racial violence in the two texts – on which I comment later.
10. The main protagonists of *Whatever*, *Atomised* and *Platform* are all called 'Michel', like the author.
11. Camus, *The Outsider*, pp. 68, 120. When Camus commented, extra-textually, that Meursault was a man executed because he refused to weep for his mother and 'refused to lie', he confirmed that we should read refusal as the sign of authenticity.
12. René Girard, 'Camus's Stranger Retried', in Harold Bloom, ed., *Albert Camus*, Chelsea House, New York and Philadelphia, 1989, pp. 79–105; pp. 79f. John Fletcher argues we should read the text as Meursault's rhetorically proficient construction: see 'L'Étranger and the New Novel', in Adele King, ed., *Camus's 'L'Étranger': Fifty Years On*, Macmillan, London, 1992, pp. 209–20.
13. Colin Wilson, *The Outsider*, Gollancz, London, 1956, p. 82. My 1969 Penguin edition of Camus's *The Outsider* lists eight earlier Penguin printings since 1961. The English hardback edition appeared in 1946. Adele King, fifty years after the novel's publication, still makes Meursault a representative of despair at the end of 'transcendence' and of surviving 'human emotions concerning the fundamental issues of life'. 'Introduction: After Fifty Years, Still a Stranger', in *Camus's 'L'Étranger'*, p. 1.
14. Aspects of *Atomised* can be read as suggesting that '1968' was a moment of critical alterity, subsequently incorporated. The 'Lieu du changement', founded by 'a

- group of '68 veterans' as a humanist and democratic self-governing community, subsequently becomes a new-age summer camp, offering residential courses in humanistic therapy to businesses and organizations (pp. 113f., 119f., 125f.). Other aspects, however, suggest simple hostility to most of what '1968' connotes.
15. Peter Brooks discusses the passage in his *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1984), Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2002, pp. 92ff. It is Brooks's translation that I quote.
 16. I can't speak for the French equivalences. At all events, Houellebecq's claim in the *Lire* interview cited above that he wrote the sex scenes with especial care can hardly be taken seriously, even if he meant it seriously.
 17. György Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, Merlin, London, 1963, p. 122.
 18. In *Atomised*, see especially the passages on the Cap d'Agde nudist colony (pp. 256–66). Christiane in *Atomised* – as submissive as Valérie – dismisses feminism in a paragraph: see pp. 173f. See *Whatever*, p. 4, for 'last dismaying dregs'.
 19. According to the *Guardian* (4 February 2004, p. 15), 10 per cent of French citizens are Muslim.
 20. A partial exception, discussing Houellebecq among other recent critics of Islam, is Hitchens's 'Holy Writ'. I am not implying that the work should have been censored or banned, or that for his remarks in an interview Houellebecq should have been found guilty of 'provocation'. But to uphold an author's right to speak and publish is not the same as to support his political opinions against criticism.
 21. Judging by the collection edited by King, *Camus's 'L'Étranger'*, few French critics fifty years after the publication of *L'Étranger* can recognize that in killing an Arab quasi-inadvertently, Meursault did what he (and Camus) in some sense wanted to do, while being able to disavow murderous desire. None of the contributors who seriously discuss the novel's colonial and 'racial' aspect (Christiane Achour, Alec G. Hargreaves, Michel Grimaud and Jan Rigaud) is based in France.
 22. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 54. Andreas Huyssens questions this paradigm opposing modernist and post-modernist aesthetics, and indicates new possibilities for a contemporary critical-artistic practice, in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism*, Macmillan, London, 1988, esp. ch. 1.
 23. Critics disagree about the generic character of 'post-modern fiction' and about what works the category would comprise. In generalizing for present purposes, I summarize works whose emphases differ considerably. See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Routledge, London and New York, 1988; Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, Routledge, London and New York, 1987; Robert Holton, *Jarring Witnesses: Modern Fiction and the Representation of History*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 1994. For some recent criticisms of Hutcheon and McHale, see Stephen Baker, *The Fiction of Postmodernity*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2000.
 24. Bryan Palmer, 'Critical Theory, Historical Materialism, and the Ostensible End of Marxism: The Poverty of Theory Revisited', reprinted in Keith Jenkins, ed., *The Postmodern History Reader*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998: see p. 111. Palmer's particular target is Young's *White Mythologies*, Routledge, London, 1990.
 25. In an earlier passage (p. 268), Renault mocks an article by Jacques Attali in the *Nouvel Observateur* arguing that the violence of young people on housing estates is a response to the flaunting display of wealth in the Champs-Élysées.

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