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The Condition of the "Post-modern" Individual? Sexual Competition and Modern "Dis-society" in Houellebecq's *Extension du domaine de la lutte*

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The plot of Michel Houellebecq's 1994 *Extension du domaine de la lutte*'s conveys in itself a great deal of bitterness and violence. The narrator is sent by the company he works for to French "province" with his colleague Raphaël Tisserand to promote a new product. They then embark on a meaningless, depressing trip, which soon reveals how little they both are capable of connecting with others—especially with women, who ignore them in spite of their comfortable enough economic status. As in *Les particules élémentaires*, Tisserand and the narrator embody the different but complementary trends that Houellebecq sees in the 20th century individual. An epitome of the anti-hero, the narrator wanders through life without goal or hope, passing by people rather than meeting them, and finally lapsing into a deep depression at the end of which he completely disconnects with humanity. Tisserand, on the other hand, dies to connect with women but miserably fails to do so, and therefore indulges into sexual obsessions.

From the very beginning, the reader gets the impression that, in our western contemporary societies (for there is little doubt that Houellebecq's spectrum is not limited to France), each individual is very likely to take part in a cruel, competitive social struggle, at the end of which he will be given the social position of what we may still call—at this stage of the reflexion—either an aggressor or a victim. Hence the crucial dimension of the expression *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, which cannot only be simply referred to as the novel's title (translated into *Whatever* in Paul

Hammond's English-language edition),¹ but also as what we may call, if not a concept, at least a notion (whose meaning has been better rendered more directly as "broadening of the struggle"). Indeed, Houellebecq's sociological ambitions cannot be swept aside, even if they arouse a lot of theoretical and methodological problems.² I will here neither discuss whether Houellebecq is just provocative or deliberately serves a reactionary purpose, nor will I try to establish to what extent his statements might be relevant: this article only aims at underlining the novel's world picture which, I believe, gives an important, though partial, hint at western contemporary representations.

In this paper, I would like to show how Houellebecq's characters embody and illustrate the process of broadening the struggle to the field of sexuality—a phenomenon which, in the novel, creates new types of symbolical violence, which makes it hard for us to assign the role of victims or aggressors to the characters. Then, I would like to emphasize the social system which, according to Michel Houellebecq, results from this violence. It will lead us to highlight a paradox: for Houellebecq, in a society undergoing a process of broadening of the struggle, the victims turn out to suffer mostly from loneliness, from the absence of the others. Paradoxically enough, they eventually end up being their own aggressors: in a society undergoing a process of broadening of the struggle, solitude leads to self-destruction. Yet let us not forget a decisive aspect of Houellebecq's style, namely the comic dimension. It would be wrong to picture Houellebecq's work as a scholarly, cold-blooded report on the contemporary individual. A derisive, malicious and sometimes hilarious tone shapes the novel, shrouds it in a Fellini-like grotesque atmosphere and, as a result, turns it into a highly satirical panorama of our modern times. In *La*

littérature sans estomac, Pierre Jourde refers to Houellebecq as *une espèce de Droopy sociologique*, focusing on the rare calmness and subdued nature of the author's ideology, which is one founded in a comical genre: satire.

I. Undermining the traditional couple victim/aggressor: sexuality as a blind, mediated and modern force of distinction

Though sexual violence pervades the novel, the reader finds it hard to identify who is guilty. He may indeed get a vivid sense of an overwhelming pain, but his attempt to side in with the victim against an aggressor tends to be defeated through a number of stylistic devices.

A. From victims and aggressors to losers and winners

There is a sharp, almost caricatural contrast between the novel's characters. As far as sex is concerned, some represent destitution whereas others are at the top of the social ladder. The author seems to take malicious pleasure in populating his novel with characters who can so easily be classified that they appear as vivid caricatures. On the one hand indeed, the main character and narrator regularly meets individuals, either men or women, who are on the verge of nervous breakdowns because of their sexual failure. Among them are Catherine Lechardoy and, above all, Raphaël Tisserand. They are depicted in a deceptively objective tone: they are characterized in such an excessive way that there is little doubt that irony pervades the author's words. Catherine Lechardoy is an administrator in the agriculture french ministry, whose power of seduction is minimal, as we learn quickly. Using a zeugma ("*She's 25, with a higher technical certificate in data processing, and prominent teeth,*" (24)), Houellebecq ridicules her right away, and establishes very clearly that she belongs to the category of sexual outcasts.

He then insists on her suffering, without losing the cold, dispassionate tone he has assumed from the very beginning:

The poor thing has slightly sad air this morning (...). Her ugly little face is glum, she regularly wipes her glasses. I even wonder if she hasn't been crying; I can just picture her breaking into sobs in the morning as she gets dressed, all alone. (33)

Michel Houellebecq makes his point even more clearly when he comes to Raphaël Tisserand, the narrator's colleague. Sexual frustration is not a temporary state Raphaël Tisserand would suffer from: it is deeply rooted within the character. Through an embedded clause, Houellebecq regards as an essence what would traditionally be characterized as pure accident, according to the traditional Aristotelian classification.

The problem with Raphael Tisserand—the *foundation of his personality, indeed*—is that he is extremely ugly. So ugly that his appearance repels women, and he never gets to sleep with them. He tries though, he tries with all his might, but it doesn't work. They simply want nothing to do with him. (...) He has the exact appearance of a buffalo toad (...). What's more, his conversation lacks finesse, fantasy, humor; he has absolutely no *charm*. (53-54, his italics)

And,

I'm well aware of why he basically likes my company so much: it's because I never speak of my female conquests. And so he feels justified in

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supposing (rightly, as it happens) that for one reason or another, I don't have a sex life; and for him that's one less burden, a slight easing of his own martyrdom. (62)

These "victims" stand in sharp contrast with the characters who, on the other hand, seem to live a world away from their universe. This is particularly perceptible as far as Thomassen is concerned, another colleague, whose description answers the previous one point by point:

I remember being present at a distressing scene the day Tisserand was introduced to Thomassen, who'd just joined our firm. Thomassen is Swedish in origin; he is extremely tall (a bit over six foot three, I reckon), superbly well-proportioned, and his face is incredibly handsome, sunny and radiant; you really have the impression of being in the presence of a superman, a demigod. (62)

1. Attractive winners: undermining the moral mechanisms of traditional narrative

Raphaël Tisserand and Thomassen's confrontation creates a lust for violence, but precisely not on Tisserand's part.

Thomassen fist shook my hand, then went over to Tisserand. Tisserand got up and realized that, standing, the other man was a good fifteen inches taller than him. He abruptly sat down, his face went bright red, I even thought for a moment that he was going to go for Thomassen's throat; it was painful to see. (62)

This passage allows us to highlight an important aspect of Houellebecq's narrative technique: after making a satirical description of characters who certainly appear to be "losers," he forestalls any attempt of the reader to sympathize with them by insisting on their aggressivity. Furthermore, Houellebecq specifies very clearly that neither Thomassen nor any of the attractive women the narrator walks by are responsible for Tisserand and Lechardoy's suffering. He even depicts them benevolently, even if the reader might doubt that this benevolence is genuine:

Later I made a number of trips to the provinces with Thomassen (...). We got on really well. I've remarked it time and again: exceptionally beautiful people are often modest, gentle, affable, considerate. They have great difficulty in making friends, at least among men. They're forced to make a constant effort to try and make you forget *their superiority*, be it ever so little. Tisserand, thank God, has never been called on to make a trip with Thomassen. But each time a group of training sessions is being organized I know he thinks about it, and that he has a lot of sleepless nights. (63, his italics)

In fact the only aggressors which can really be found in the novel turn out to be hardly perceptible. Here and there in the novel, they are anonymous, like the unidentified people who commit murders the narrator hears about in the newspaper or is told about by his friend.

2. New "scènes de la vie moderne": aggressive urban landscapes

Still, the main source of aggression the reader encounters throughout the novel does not come from a human being. Much more aggressive appear to be modern urbanism and architecture, which Houellebecq describes in a way reminiscent of Jacques Tati’s 1967 masterpiece *Playtime*. As a result, urban landscapes come across as inhospitable, threatening settings, which serve rather commercial than humanistic purposes. This is particularly perceptible on two occasions, first when the narrator describes the 13th arrondissement in Paris, then when he walks through the area of La Part-Dieu, in Lyon. These two modern areas have undergone a great deal of urbanistic renovations in the recent past. Built in the late 1970s, la Part-Dieu’s TGV station, skyscraper, shopping mall and office complex have often been presented as the showcase of French urban and architectural modernization. Skillfully enough, Houellebecq inverts the official rhetoric so that these buildings take the shape of steel ghosts:

Above the bus station proper rises a hypermodern structure in glass and steel, with four or five levels linked by stainless steel escalators which are activated at the least approach; nothing save luxury shops (perfume and cosmetics, haute couture, gadgets) with absurdly aggressive window display; nothing for sale that might prove remotely useful.
(130)

II. When anomia becomes the rule: an emerging “dis-society”³

A. When economic liberalism’s rules apply to the field of feelings: sexuality as a foundation of the social hierarchy

In *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, Michel Houellebecq takes up the challenge—which seems to become increasingly perilous—of marrying literature and theory. The author has opinions concerning sexuality's role in our societies, and he clearly intends to make his point. The broadening of the struggle consists in extending the rules of a liberal economy to the field of sexual and sentimental relationships. Sexuality, according to the narrator, tends to be used as a means to distinguish oneself from the other. It has introduced, still according to him, new kinds of poverty and wealth, and has deeply rooted sexual performance at the core of social hierarchy. He begins by stating that "Sexuality is a system of social hierarchy" (93), and continues to explain:

It's a fact, I mused to myself, that in societies like ours sex truly represents a second system of differentiation, completely independent of money; and as a system of differentiation it functions just as mercilessly. The effects of these two systems are, furthermore, strictly equivalent. Just like unrestrained economic liberalism, and for similar reasons, sexual liberalism produces phenomena of *absolute pauperization*. Some men make love every day; others five or six times in their life, or never. Some make love with dozens of women; others with none. It's what's known as the 'law of the market'. In an economic system where unfair dismissal is prohibited, every person more or less manages to find their place. In a sexual system where adultery is prohibited, every person more or less manages to find their bed mate. In a totally liberal economic system, certain people accumulate considerable fortunes; others

stagnate in unemployment and misery. In a totally liberal sexual system certain people have a varied and exciting erotic life; others are reduced to masturbation and solitude. Economic liberalism is an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes of society. Sexual liberalism is likewise an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes of society. On the economic plane Raphael Tisserand belongs in the victor's camp; on the sexual plane in that of the vanquished. (99)

B. Solitude as the real oppression

What the narrator names "absolute pauperization" leads to a sense of loneliness, which is often unbearable, and which the characters have great difficulty admitting. Such loneliness leads to what might appear as a paradox as far as our reflexion here is concerned. Not only do the victims turn out to be aggressive towards the other, but they also mostly end up hurting themselves, by being their own aggressors. This is particularly the case of the hero who, after accidentally cutting his hands on a broken mirror, is once tempted to indulge into scarification. This loneliness—especially the one the hero experiences in the psychiatric hospital—is not presented as a temporary way to recover. There is no salvation in the novel, and neither psychoanalysis nor religion manage to make up for it. In the end, the narrator totally fails to feel in harmony with nature, taking leave of the reader on an acme of solitude.

For years I have been walking alongside a phantom who looks like me, and who lives in a theoretical paradise strictly related to the world. I've long

believed that it was up to me to become one with this phantom. That's done with. (...) I feel my skin again as a frontier, and the external world as a crushing weight. The impression of separation is total; from now on I am imprisoned within myself. It will not take place, the sublime fusion; the goal of my life is missed. It is two in the afternoon. (155)

As it turns out, interactions between individuals craving for sexual distinction leads to an anomia, whose consequences are described very vividly, but also with a lot of humor and self-derision.

Conclusion: Is *Extension du domaine de la lutte* a nihilistic, post-modern novel?

All things considered, can *Extension du domaine de la lutte* be qualified as a nihilistic, amoral novel? The question has been asked, creating a definite ambiguity as to whether or not Houellebecq aims only at describing what he sees, or if he also intends to question it. I personally doubt that his work is nihilistic. First, when asked which authors influence him, I have never heard Houellebecq referring to an author such as Céline,⁴ and often names none other than celebrated moralist La Rochefoucauld. Another compelling study for another day would be to examine the similarities and differences that exist between Houellebecq's narrative technique and that of the 17th-century French moralists, including La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère among others.

Secondly, a number of passages in the novel suggest that Houellebecq has no intention of sticking to harsh descriptions and cruel statements. Interspersed throughout the novel, hidden amongst sordid descriptions of

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unsuccessful relationships, are various self-conscious, discrete hints at what individuals crave and desire.

While the narrator evokes his failure with his former partner, the author seems to slip a splendid definition of love:

Veronique had known too many discotheques, too many lovers (...). Love as a kind of innocence and as a capacity for illusion, as an aptitude for epitomizing the whole of the other sex in a single loved being rarely resists a year of sexual [*vagabondage*], and never two. (113)⁵

When it comes to the patients of the psychiatric hospital, the author shifts from an indifferent tone to a desperate, almost lyrical voice:

The idea gradually dawned on me that all these people—men or women—were not in the least deranged; they were simply lacking love. Their gestures, their attitudes, their dumb show betrayed an excruciating craving for physical contact and caresses; but that wasn't possible, of course. So they sobbed, emitted cries, lacerated themselves with their nails; during my stay we had a successful attempt at castration. (149)

This does not mean that Houellebecq is in fact a humanist who craves for awakening contemporary individuals and arousing their will to live in a better world. Houellebecq does not call for any change, nor does he seem to believe in politics at all. But it would most probably be a mistake, not only to forget his irony, which pervades the novel and is a major source of comic, but also to think the novel leads to a

deadlock: but it is only in *Les particules élémentaires* that this opinion might be confirmed.

Finally, Houellebecq has also been characterised as a post-modern author: the critics Ralph Schoolcraft and Richard Golsan thus claim that a number of elements associated with this cultural trend, for all its variety, are to be found in *L'extension du domaine de la lutte*. According to them, Houellebecq's work manifests numerous writing practices associated with postmodernism that include mixing literary forms, integrating epistemological discourses, doubling characters, avoidance of meta-narratives, and destabilizing interpretation through irony, fractured perspectives, the parodic recycling of popular genres such as detective fiction and eroticism, etc. More generally, the narrator's comments and behaviour have more in common with the ideal-type of overburdened modern individuals, identified by David Ashley in his article "Habermas and the Completion of 'The Project of Modernity'," for whom the desire to maintain any resemblance of rootedness or integrity becomes futile.

But as tempting as the characterisation of Houellebecq's work as post-modern might be, one should, once again, pay attention to the regular value statements, though discrete and often sugar-coated, that the narrator makes. What is more, Houellebecq's progressive fascination for science makes it very difficult to describe his work as typically post-modern, since it is at odds with the utter scepticism that Baudrillard shows towards science. Here a brief glance at Houellebecq's later novels is useful. In the last chapter of *Les particules élémentaires* and the recurring science-fictional chapters of *La possibilité d'une île*, in particular, science takes on a crucial role and very complex dimension. On the one hand, Houellebecq identifies science as the driving force behind the growing anomia—since with modern techniques of

procreation, physical contact between human being is not necessary to achieve the reproduction of mankind. On the other hand, the author does handle the topic of science with a deep fascination: having dealt with the topic, he shifts from the derisive, ironic tone that he uses to depict "regular," contemporary human beings, to a neutral, soothing and somewhat pacified tone. The reader is left with a sense that science will destroy all kinds of social links, and give way to a new social order, constructed of both loneliness and peace. The impression of mystery and uncertainty which pervades these science-fictional chapters might make Houellebecq's work closer to post-modern thought—but, only on the grounds that we stick to a very simple, restrictive definition of post-modernism. It might, therefore, be more fruitful to underline Houellebecq's great ability to highlight an issue which has been part and parcel of modernity, and which perhaps evokes Rousseau much more than Baudrillard: social link is at the same time what defines human beings and what makes them suffer. Our technical skills might lead us beyond our condition; notwithstanding, our issues still remain... And, it might be precisely this lucid depiction of a dual, somewhat tortured human condition, more than a clear intellectual position, that makes Houellebecq's novel so powerful.

Notes

¹ The quotes in English are from this translation.

² As a sociologist, the methods he uses and the generalizations he takes the liberty to make are to be questioned. This issue has been discussed by Eric Fassin in his article "Le roman noir de la sexualité française."

³ We borrow here the phrase recently coined by French economist Jacques Généreux (cf. *La Dissociété*, 2006).

⁴ Nevertheless, in his essay *Houellebecq, en fait*, the author's friend Dominique Noguez makes this very comparison—more, however, on the grounds a stylistical perspective than as far as the world picture is concerned.

⁵ Hammond translates Houellebecq's French term *vagabondage sexuel* as "sexual immorality," which does not appear to take into consideration many of the nuances of the idea (i.e. vagrancy, exploration). I have opted to keep Houellebecq's original term.

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UCLA French Studies

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, Le Quart Livre

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And a Special *In Memoriam* for
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