

Russell James Williams

PhD thesis

Pathos, poetry and narrative perspective

in Michel Houellebecq's fiction

University of London Institute in Paris

I, Russell James Williams, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signed: Russell James Williams

Date: 9/01/2015

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Thesis abstract

This thesis is written in the context of several trends in the existing critical literature that considers Michel Houellebecq's novels. Firstly, his work has been examined through the prism of the philosophical and socio-political issues and ideas it interrogates. Secondly, Houellebecq's texts have been examined intertextually in relation to the work of canonical French and European authors, predominantly from the nineteenth century. Thirdly, critics have focused on the author's flair for provocation in his writing and media interviews and considered Houellebecq primarily as a polemicist. Finally, and across all of these approaches, critical consideration of his literary style has largely been dismissive and derided his writing as 'plat' or foregrounded its 'essayistic' or discursive tropes.

This thesis argues that a distinct 'poetics', creative principles that govern his use of language, can be identified in Houellebecq's novels. From this starting point, this study proposes that Houellebecq's work demonstrates a 'pathétique' quality of writing with a capacity to create an emotional effect on his readers. It argues that this quality contributes to a distinctly affective tone that characterises Houellebecq's fiction. To achieve this, the thesis will explore the trajectory of this quality of language through a close critical reading of three little examined areas of Houellebecq's writing: his earliest published poetry and its relationship to his prose; his distinctive and ubiquitous authorial voice and his exploitation of models from twentieth century literature, particularly genre fiction.

In this way, the thesis demonstrates that Houellebecq's novels display a preoccupation with the reader and his or her experience of reading that has not yet been taken into full consideration by his critics. It suggests that, in a way that challenges descriptions of it as 'plat', Houellebecq's writing asserts a distinctive lyrical style, founded on his poetry, and is notable for the affective engagement it brings about. This thesis thus displays the techniques by which Houellebecq's work tends towards a complex emotionality that provides a challenge to both the prevailing discourses of contemporary postmodern society and to what remains of the French literary *avant-garde*.

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Pathos, poetry and narrative perspective in Michel Houellebecq's fiction

Introduction

1. Introduction

Michel Houellebecq is undoubtedly contemporary France's highest profile literary export. He has published six novels, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994), *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998), *Plateforme* (2001), *La Possibilité d'une île* (2005), *La Carte et le territoire* (2010), *Soumission* (2015) and a novella, *Lanzarote* (2000), most of which have been translated into English and numerous languages worldwide.¹ He is best known for his prose fiction, particularly outside France, but has also published four volumes of poetry, *La Poursuite du Bonheur* (1992), *Le Sens du combat* (1996), *Renaissance* (1999) and *Configuration du dernier rivage* (2013).²

As well as this creative output, Houellebecq has regularly published pieces of critical writing on a range of cultural, political and social topics, many of which have been anthologised in *Interventions* (1998) and *Interventions 2* (2009). In collaboration with philosopher Bernard Henri-Lévy he has published *Ennemis publics* (2008), an epistolary exchange where the pair reflect on their roles as contemporary writers among other issues. Houellebecq has also collaborated with artists Sarah Wiame and Gilles Touyard, who have incorporated his written work into their visual or conceptual art. His collaborations have also been musical, and Houellebecq has worked with musicians Jean-Claude Vannier and Bertrand Burgalat, fronting a group with the latter that set a number of Houellebecq's poems to music, issued an album, *Présences humaines* (2000) and performed live on a 2000 French tour. Houellebecq has directed a short film for

¹ *Soumission* (Paris: Flammarion, 2015) was published just prior to the final completion of this text and will thus not receive any sustained analysis here. It also the only novel to have not yet been translated into English.

² Only Houellebecq's second volume of poetry has been translated into English to date: Michel Houellebecq, *The Art of Struggle*, trans. by Daphne Grass and Timothy Mathews (London: Herla, 2011). A new volume of Houellebecq's collected poetry is set for publication by Gallimard in 2014.

television, *La Rivière* (2001), and his own adaptation of *La Possibilité d'une île* (2007) for cinema release. He additionally collaborated with film director Philippe Harel on the latter's adaptation of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1999).³ Houellebecq has also stepped in front of the camera, taking acting roles in the films *L'Affaire Gordji* (2011), *L'Enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq* (2014) and *Near Death Experience* (2014).

Despite the diversity of his artistic output it is, as noted above, as a novelist that Houellebecq is best known. His fiction has obtained formal recognition through literary awards such as the 1998 Prix Novembre for *Les Particules élémentaires*, the Prix Interallié for *La Possibilité d'une île* and, most prestigiously, the Prix Goncourt in 2010 for *La Carte et le territoire*. Despite the broad critical and undoubted commercial success of the novels, critical discussions of Houellebecq's work have frequently focussed on paratextual issues. Since the appearance of *Les Particules élémentaires*, the publication of all of Houellebecq's novels has been marked by some form of literary scandal or *affaire Houellebecq* that has occluded critical discussion of the texts.⁴ The publication of *Les Particules élémentaires* was marked both by legal pressure from a New Age campsite that objected to its depiction, under its real name, and by Houellebecq's ousting from the editorial board of the art revue *Perpendiculaire* for what Ruth Cruickshank has described as 'ideological differences'.⁵ The release of *Plateforme* was accompanied by an interview with the literary magazine *Lire* where Houellebecq asserted: 'la religion la plus con, c'est quand même l'islam. Quand on lit le Coran, on est effondré... effondré!'.⁶ This statement led to the author's highly-mediated prosecution for 'complicité de provocation à la discrimination, à la haine ou

³ *Les Particules élémentaires* (2006) was also adapted for screen by the German director Oskar Roehler. Houellebecq played no part in the production.

⁴ The term 'affaire Houellebecq' emerged in media discussions of the furore around *Les Particules élémentaires* and was also used to describe the subsequent scandal surrounding *Plateforme*.

⁵ Ruth Cruickshank, 'L'Affaire Houellebecq: ideological crime and fin de millénaire literary scandal', *French Cultural Studies*, 14 (2013), 101-116 (p. 107). I will discuss this *affaire* in further detail on p. 37 of this introduction and in Chapter Three below.

⁶ Didier Sénécal, 'Entretien, Michel Houellebecq', *Lire*, September 2001, pp. 28-36 (p. 31).

à la violence à l'égard d'un groupe de personnes en raison de son appartenance à une religion' and 'injure' following complaints from a coalition of French Islamic groups.⁷ *La Carte et le territoire* saw a lower magnitude and entirely media-led *affaire* that saw the author accused of plagiarism for apparently incorporating entries from the online encyclopaedia *Wikipedia* into the novel with only minimal amendments.⁸ In addition, as I consider presently, discussion of Houellebecq's work has frequently been overshadowed by discussion of the author as personality. This has centred on the extent to which he shares or endorses the provocative ideas that are held up for critical consideration in his work.

When critics of Houellebecq's work have concentrated on his texts, they have tended to highlight their social, political or philosophical dimensions. This is unsurprising since his fiction consistently evokes issues that relate to contemporary French and broader Western experience. As Marc Weitzmann asserts, Houellebecq's work is: 'la seule à s'inscrire dans le paysage mental et sociologique de la France contemporaine majoritaire, dont il [Houellebecq] exprime la mentalité mieux que quiconque – et dont l'implacable pouvoir de description fait toute la force de ses livres'.⁹ This assessment is reinforced by Éric Naulleau's description of Houellebecq as an 'écrivain sociologique' and clearly reflects how his novels explore social issues that pertain to contemporary French life.¹⁰ *Les Particules élémentaires*, for example, considers the ongoing legacy of 1968 within French society. *Plateforme* examines tourism, prostitution and terrorism against a backdrop of urban violence. *La Carte et le territoire* explores France's standing in an increasingly globalized world, as well as a

⁷ Houellebecq was eventually acquitted. These accusations will be considered in detail in Chapter Three.

⁸ Vincent Glad, 'Houellebecq, la possibilité d'un plagiat', *Slate.fr*, <<http://www.slate.fr/story/26745/wikipedia-plagiat-michel-houellebecq-carte-territoire>> [accessed 14 October 2013].

⁹ Marc Weitzmann, 'Michel Houellebecq, aspects de la France', *Le Monde*, 7 September 2001.

¹⁰ Éric Naulleau, *Au secours, Houellebecq revient!* (Paris: Chiflet & Cie, 2005), p. 88.

range of additional issues including the contemporary debate surrounding the ethics of assisted suicide.

Similarly, critics of Houellebecq's novels have tended to focus on the ideas explored in his texts. In this way, Houellebecq has often been described as a philosophical writer, or even philosopher, where the vision presented by his work has been the major focus of critical consideration. Liesbeth Korthals Altes has considered *Les Particules élémentaires* from the perspective of the *roman à thèse*.¹¹ Antonio Muñoz Ballesta has boldly attempted to articulate 'la philosophie de Michel Houellebecq' which, according to the critic, draws on Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard.¹² Douglas Morrey has considered how Houellebecq can be read as a 'posthuman' thinker and demonstrated that his 'work has a significant contribution to make to debates about the "posthuman" which have recently animated fields as diverse as computer science, philosophy and popular culture'.¹³ Bruno Viard, the foremost French critic of Houellebecq's work, has highlighted the resonances between his writing and nineteenth century thinkers including Auguste Comte, Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer and Alexis de Tocqueville.¹⁴ Political, social and philosophical questions are clearly of acute critical importance with regards to how they are interrogated within Houellebecq's work, not least since, as these critics have shown, his writing displays evidence of both a wide reading of, and an interest in, the history of ideas.

Critical approaches that place a great deal of emphasis on Houellebecq's social or philosophical vision, however, risk occluding Houellebecq's talent as a novelist, most precisely his distinctive prose style. Naulleau, for example, has asserted that

¹¹ Liesbeth Korthals Altes, 'Persuasion et ambiguïté dans un roman à thèse postmoderne', in *Michel Houellebecq*, ed. by Sabine van Wesemael (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 29-45.

¹² Antonio Muñoz Ballesta, 'Houellebecq philosophe', in *Le Monde de Houellebecq*, ed. by Gavin Bowd (Glasgow: University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 2006), pp. 277-285 (p. 277).

¹³ Douglas Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq, Humanity and its Aftermath* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), p. 8.

¹⁴ Bruno Viard, *Les Tiroirs de Michel Houellebecq* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013).

‘Michel Houellebecq n’est pas un écrivain à style, mais un écrivain à thèmes’.¹⁵ As Andrew Hussey notes, however, one of the most important and critically overlooked points about the author is that he is a ‘first-rate prose stylist’.¹⁶ Houellebecq himself has observed that ‘J’ai l’impression que les gens n’osent pas trop parler de mon lyrisme’.¹⁷ Critics have in fact repeatedly derided Houellebecq’s prose style. It has frequently been described, for example, as ‘plat’. François Meyronnis states that his novels are ‘rédigés dans la langue la plus plate’ and describes his prose as both ‘mesquine et utilitaire’.¹⁸ Michel Waldberg describes Houellebecq’s language as ‘vomitif’ and decried ‘les plus ineptes dialogues, les plus abjectes descriptions’ of his work.¹⁹ Marie Redonnet has also attacked Houellebecq’s writing for what she describes as its stylistic shortcomings, noting of *Les Particules élémentaires*, ‘la carence la plus grave du roman [est] son absence totale de poésie, comme pouvoir de la langue à produire dans l’écriture du rêve et de la pensée’.²⁰

It is, of course, possible to read the style of Houellebecq’s fiction as inseparable from an overall philosophical or sociological vision as articulated through the content of his writing. This is a reading of his work that Houellebecq himself would appear to encourage. He has, for example, in an open letter to critic Lakis Proguidis, stated that, in discussions of his literary style, ‘je me suis souvent répété cette phrase de Schopenhauer: “La première – et pratiquement la seule – condition d’un bon style, c’est

¹⁵ Naulleau, *Au secours, Houellebecq revient!*, p. 86.

¹⁶ Andrew Hussey, ‘Death of the Author’, *Literary Review*, <http://www.literaryreview.co.uk/hussey_10_11.html>, [accessed 27 August 2013] (para. 1 of 7).

¹⁷ Houellebecq, ‘En toutes lettres’, *Les Inrockuptibles Hors série Houellebecq*, 2005, pp. 10-14 (p. 13).

¹⁸ François Meyronnis, *De l’extermination considérée comme un des beaux arts* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), pp. 48 & 163.

¹⁹ Michel Waldberg, *La Parole putanisée*, (Paris: La Différence, 2002) pp. 36 & 39. Nelly Kapriélian of *Les Inrockuptibles* has elsewhere noted how some readers have found Houellebecq’s writing style ‘trop “plat”’, <<http://www.lesinrocks.com/2013/03/28/livres/houellebecq-possiblite-un-vers-11378470/>> [accessed August 27, 2013] (para. 1 of 3).

Yves Michaud, writing for *Libération* has also described Houellebecq’s writing as ‘volontairement plat et neutre’, <http://traverses.blogs.liberation.fr/yves_michaud/2010/11/a-pr.html> [accessed August 27, 2013] (para. 5 of 10).

²⁰ Marie Redonnet, ‘La barbarie postmoderne’, *Art Press*, 244 (1999), pp. 59-64 (p. 59).

d'avoir quelque chose à dire”²¹ Reading his fiction in this way, however, risks relegating the subtleties and specificities of Houellebecq's literary style and skill as a novelist to a secondary consideration as *what* he says in his work is favoured over *how* he says it. In the present study, I propose a reading of Houellebecq's work that foregrounds his literary style and suggests it is an appropriate starting point for a critical consideration of his fiction. I will not discount the ideas his work holds up for consideration, but suggest that the manner of expression of these ideas equally warrants close critical attention alongside the questions his texts raise about contemporary social experience.

This thesis aims to deepen critical understanding of Houellebecq's novelistic technique and to first and foremost consider him as a novelist rather than primarily as a political, social or philosophical thinker. It therefore argues that Houellebecq can be read as a prose stylist and attempts to provide a thorough examination of the aesthetic techniques he brings to bear in his writing. In particular, it will demonstrate that Houellebecq's novels display a preoccupation with the reader and the experience of reading as governed by literary style in a way that has not yet been taken into full critical consideration. Contrary to Redonnet's observation noted above, I demonstrate that Houellebecq's fiction in fact shows a persistent preoccupation with 'poésie'. Moreover, the 'poésie' of Houellebecq's writing, I suggest, is located in how his work repeatedly asserts the potential of writing to create an emotional effect on his readers through what he describes as its 'pathétique' quality. I will demonstrate that such 'poésie' is not confined to his formal verse and can be regarded as a quality of writing that can be mapped from his early poems to his subsequent novels. The 'poésie' of Houellebecq's work is thus exploited throughout his writing and can be observed in his formal poetry, 'poetic' prose and the overall immersive mood of his fiction. This thesis

²¹ Houellebecq, 'Lettre à Lakis Proguidis', *Interventions 2*, pp.151-156 (p. 153).

will thus expand upon Olivier Bardolle's assertion that 'C'est son style qui rend Houellebecq à la fois fascinant et répugnant, parce que ce style est efficace, et il est efficace parce qu'il génère l'émotion. Il nous touche au cœur, aux tripes, bien davantage qu'au cerveau'.²² Indeed, it is the overall *efficacité* and complexity of the techniques that produce emotion in Houellebecq's work that this study will highlight.

Through an initial consideration of Houellebecq's writing about literature, and through a subsequent close reading of a selection of his poetry and his fictive prose in the light of the conclusions I will draw, this thesis demonstrates that the foundations of a distinct 'poetics', or aesthetic principles, that govern his use of language, can be articulated in relation to Houellebecq's work. Throughout, I will stress the primacy of what Houellebecq describes as 'poetry' within these principles. In doing so I will reinforce Aurélien Bellanger's suggestion that 'On peut presque affirmer que Houellebecq ne devient romancier que pour restaurer le règne de la poésie', and highlight the profound relationship between the two forms of writing in the author's work.²³

In his writing on literature, Houellebecq has highlighted a crisis in contemporary representation which touches the novel in a way that mirrors what Fredric Jameson has described as 'the waning of affect' in contemporary, or postmodern, culture.²⁴ Houellebecq bemoans 'l'impossibilité toute contemporaine de la *conversation*',²⁵ whereby 'la représentation a perdu toute innocence', meaning 'L'introduction massive dans les représentations de *références*, de dérision, de *second degré*, d'humour a rapidement miné l'activité artistique et philosophique en la transformant en rhétorique généralisée'.²⁶ In such a situation, emotional sincerity in art has become highly

²² Olivier Bardolle, *La Littérature à vif* (Paris: L'Esprit des péninsules, 2004), p. 63.

²³ Aurélien Bellanger, *Houellebecq, écrivain romantique* (Paris: Éditions Léo Scheer, 2010), p. 76.

²⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 10.

²⁵ Houellebecq, 'Approches du désarroi', in *Interventions 2*, pp. 23-45 (p. 38) [italics in original text].

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37 [italics in original text].

problematic: ‘Tout se passe en effet dans la conversation courante comme si l’expression d’un sentiment, d’une émotion, d’une idée était devenue impossible, parce que trop vulgaire’.²⁷ In the analysis that follows, I consider how Houellebecq’s fiction can be read within the context of such a situation and demonstrate how his work tends towards an unfashionable emotionality. As Jameson notes, the waning of affect within culture is symptomised by artistic ‘depthlessness’ in terms of emotion that is also characterized by ‘the end [...] of style in the sense of the unique and the personal’.²⁸ This study thus considers how Houellebecq frequently works against such cultural logic and seeks to assert his own style which frequently foregrounds the emotional, concluding that Houellebecq’s work has profound implications for the relationship between writing and emotion. It will also, however, consider the extent to which such emotionality is inevitably problematized within Houellebecq’s writing since it appears to be contaminated by the very crisis he has identified.

In this way, I also highlight the implications of Houellebecq’s prose for our critical understanding of the contemporary French novel. I will consider that the emotion brought about by Houellebecq’s ‘poésie’ posits a challenge to the broader discourses of contemporary society and other more dispassionate or ‘neutral’ writing, in particular that of the recent French literary *avant garde*.²⁹ Much of Houellebecq’s prose appears designed to evoke emotion through pathos or sentimentality in a way that is incongruous, often provocatively so, within the context of modern and contemporary French writing which has frequently championed dispassionate neutrality and formal

²⁷ Houellebecq, ‘Approches du désarroi’, p. 38.

²⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 15.

²⁹ In particular, I suggest that the emotional impact of Houellebecq’s work should be read in the context of the ‘objective’ writing of the *nouveau roman*, the most recent significant literary movement in France, as exemplified by the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet, which frequently displays ‘rigorously neutral descriptions of minute objective detail’. Martin Crowley, ‘The modern French novel’, in *The Cambridge History of French Literature*, ed. by William Burgwinkle, Nicholas Hammond and Emma Wilson (Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 572. Houellebecq has been outspoken in his criticism of the novels of the *nouveau roman*, and his ‘mépris’ towards Robbe-Grillet’s work in particular, for its ‘ambitions formelles de la littérature pure’ and his ‘regard neutre, purement objectif sur le monde’. Houellebecq, ‘Coupes de sol’, *Interventions 2*, pp. 277-282 (279 & 281).

experimentation. This may go some way to explaining Houellebecq's inconsistent relationship with his critics, particularly in France.³⁰ Furthermore such evocative prose equally appears at odds with the dominant societal discourses of media and advertising as propagated by what Houellebecq describes as the 'flux informative-publicitaire' of contemporary society.³¹

To achieve this, the thesis explores the trajectory of the emotional potential of language, what Houellebecq describes as the 'pathétique', within his work. This introduction initially provides an overview of the main strands in the critical reception of Houellebecq's prose and highlights approaches to his work that have considered his style, relationship to the literary canon and the ideas it holds up for critical inquiry with the objective of demonstrating that, despite a tendency among critics to focus on Houellebecq as *provocateur*, a broader engagement with the emotional capacity of his work is possible. The introduction will then consider Houellebecq's writing about literature and explore how he has articulated his aesthetic principles, in particular those relating to the relationship between writing and emotion. In doing so, I interrogate the author's critical lexicon and consider his definitions of 'prose', 'poetry' and the 'pathétique', which, I suggest, resonate with the work of poetry theorist Jean Cohen. I also demonstrate that Houellebecq has articulated the distinct spectrum of emotional effect that his work strives to create.

The starting point for my analysis is Houellebecq's poetry and I will suggest that Houellebecq's voice within poetry can be mapped into his novels which, I will argue, retain a distinct sensitivity to language that can be observed in their 'poetic' qualities, particularly in terms of how they create an emotional effect that I will describe as

³⁰ Since the demise of the *nouveau roman*, contemporary writers such as Annie Ernaux in *La Place* (1983) and Jean-Philippe Toussant in *Faire l'amour* (2002) have striven towards a similar neutral objectivity. The challenge provided by emotional sincerity in writing has been suggested by Roland Barthes who, in a consideration of 'L'obscène de l'amour' highlighted *Nous deux*, a glossy consumer magazine famous for its cloyingly sentimental romantic photostories, as 'plus obscène que Sade'. Roland Barthes, 'Fragments d'un discours amoureux' in *Œuvres complètes*, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 1995), V, pp. 25-290 (p. 220).

³¹ Houellebecq, 'Approches du désarroi', p. 45.

characteristic of his work. This will be considered in detail in the first two chapters of this thesis which will initially outline the themes, techniques and imagery of a selection of Houellebecq's earliest poems before demonstrating how these characteristics recur throughout his subsequent novels and bring about the reader's emotional engagement. Chapter Three will examine Houellebecq's distinctive, yet ambiguous, authorial voice and consider how this frequently complicates a reader's emotional identification with his fiction, particularly with regards to the provocative and racist, sexist and paedophilic assertions it appears to make. Chapter Four will continue the emphasis on the 'pathétique' within Houellebecq's novels, and suggest a reader's emotional engagement comes from an unexpected source: how they resemble the characteristic tropes of the *roman policier*. I will suggest that this genre is also founded on a form of 'poésie' or the emotional immersion of the reader in the text. I will, however, suggest that this effect is ultimately disappointed or undermined.

2. Critical reception

A wide range of critical responses to Houellebecq's fiction have been published to date in both scholarly volumes and publications for a general readership which mirrors the domestic and global commercial popularity of his work. The growing body of scholarly criticism includes five collections of academic essays and a steadily increasing number of monographs, book chapters and journal articles published in both English and French.³² Notably, however, and this is perhaps revealing about the way Houellebecq is viewed by the French academic community, traditionally suspicious of literature that is

³² For the essays see: *Le Monde de Houellebecq*, ed. by Gavin Bowd; *Michel Houellebecq*, ed. by Sabine van Wesemael; *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, ed. by Murielle Lucie Clément and Sabine van Wesemael (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007); *Michel Houellebecq à la une*, ed. by Murielle Lucie Clément and Sabine van Wesemael (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011) and *L'Unité de l'œuvre de Michel Houellebecq*, ed. by Bruno Viard and Sabine van Wesemael (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014). Published monographs in French include: Sabine van Wesemael, *Michel Houellebecq, le plaisir du texte* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005) and Murielle Lucie Clément *Michel Houellebecq: Sperme et Sang* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003). Three monographs on Houellebecq's work have been published in English: John McCann, *Michel Houellebecq, Author of Our Times* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010); Douglas Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq, Humanity and its Aftermath* and Carole Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). The latter volume was published while the manuscript of the present study was being finalised, hence it receives no sustained examination here.

overly popular or populist, the majority of serious Houellebecq criticism, including that in the French language, comes from outside France.³³ In addition, there is an abundance of critical articles about his work published in French literary and art journals, as well as popular criticism, widely available in bookshops rather than catering exclusively to a literary or academic audience, and a biography.³⁴

Houellebecq's work has also been extensively discussed within media, both in France and globally. His novels are systematically reviewed and discussed in the literary pages of consumer magazines such as *Les Inrockuptibles* and *Technikart*, as well as both news and feature sections of newspapers as globally and ideologically diverse as *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *The Observer*, *The New Statesman*, *The New York Times* and *The Australian*. Houellebecq's work is also regularly discussed on French radio and television, and he has become a familiar media figure. The promotional campaign for 2010's *La Carte et le territoire*, for example, saw the author discuss his work on literary television shows such as TF1's 'Au Field de la nuit' and France 5's 'Café Picouly' as well as more mainstream shows such as Canal+'s high-profile 'Le Grand Journal' and the France 2 evening television news. Increasingly, Houellebecq has been a subject for online discussion with the influential *Mediapart* and *Ring* featuring in-depth considerations of his work in addition to blog and fan forum discussions.³⁵ Much popular criticism has focused on the figure of the author, with Denis Demonpion's biography looking for the origins of Houellebecq's fiction within his real-life experiences such as his much-discussed relationship with his mother, a topic that

³³ The notable exception here is Bruno Viard who has published two monographs on Houellebecq: *Les Tiroirs de Michel Houellebecq* and *Houellebecq au laser: La faute à Mai 68* (Marseille: Ovidia, 2008). For a useful consideration of French literary snobbism with reference to contemporary bestselling fiction see Diana Holmes, 'The Comfortable Reader: Romantic Bestsellers and Critical Disdain', *French Cultural Studies*, 21:4 (2010), 287-296.

³⁴ Houellebecq's work has been discussed in literary journals including *L'Atelier du Roman*, Philippe Sollers' *L'Infini* and *Ligne de risque* as well as more consumer-oriented newsstand publications including *Le Magazine littéraire*, *Lire* and *Art Press*. Popular criticism includes Éric Naulleau, *Au secours Houellebecq revient!* and Aurélien Bellanger, *Houellebecq, écrivain romantique*. The biography is Denis Demonpion, *Houellebecq non autorisé* (Paris: Maren Sell, 2005).

³⁵ Online fan discussion has taken place at the 'Forum des amis de Michel Houellebecq', <<http://www.oragora.com/cgi/forum10024.cgi?numforum=100241>> [accessed 7 December 2013].

was also considered in her autobiography which, in part, explores her relationship with him.³⁶ This thesis considers critical responses to Houellebecq's work from a range of these more popular sources as part of the corpus of criticism examined.

Given the large and growing body of work devoted to Houellebecq, it is natural that his work has been subjected to a wide-range of critical approaches. The following section provides an overview of such approaches. It will firstly consider how critics have considered the style of Houellebecq's novels before highlighting the relationship between his work and the French literary canon, particularly how he has been described as a realist, naturalist and 'postnaturaliste' writer before considering his place in the broader French literary landscape. I will then consider the much-discussed sex in Houellebecq's work and highlight the 'libidinal economy' it articulates since this is an important recurring thematic feature of his writing. The final section of this critical survey will consider how critics have responded to the ideas held up for examination in Houellebecq's work.

2a. Houellebecq's style

Critical writing about Houellebecq that has focused on the texts rather than the man has included much discussion of his literary style, or what has been described as his lack of style. Despite such critical derision, Bardolle has described his so-called 'style "plat"' a 'signe de reconnaissance immédiat',³⁷ but has also been more constructive in highlighting 'une écriture clinique digne d'un médecin légiste'.³⁸ Carole Sweeney has highlighted Houellebecq's 'banal, familiar, everyday non-literary language' and what she describes as his 'monotonous, often inconsistently textured, drone'.³⁹ Olivier

³⁶ For an example of author-centric popular media criticism see Frédéric Beigbeder, 'Houellebecq, portrait d'un iconoclaste', *Le Figaro Magazine*, 20617, 13 November 2010, pp. 30-36. In his biography *Demonpion* speculates an anti-Islam sentiment was awakened in Houellebecq when his camera was stolen on a 1974 trip to Casablanca. *Demonpion, Houellebecq non autorisé*, p. 58. The full implications of the problematic issue of authorial identity will be considered in the Chapter Three. The autobiography of Houellebecq's mother, Lucie Ceccaldi, is *L'Innocente* (Paris: Scali, 2008).

³⁷ Olivier Bardolle, *La Littérature à vif*, p. 55.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

³⁹ Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair*, pp. x & 8.

Bessard-Banquy notes Houellebecq's 'phrase sèche et acérée'.⁴⁰ An examination of Houellebecq's style has been provided in a long essay, 'Le Style de Houellebecq', by writer Dominique Noguez, a staunch supporter of his work. For Noguez, Houellebecq has a recognisable, albeit understated, literary style marked by 'traits involontaires, observables parfois sur les détails infimes'.⁴¹ Amongst the hallmarks of 'le style houellebecquien', Noguez notes three registers of language within the 'plat': an elevated, elegant literary language, a more common, 'médian' language that reflects that spoken in everyday situations that forms the bulk of Houellebecq's prose and a third level that makes use of slang and crude sexual language.

Within this 'médian' language, Noguez has located a key Houellebecquian stylistic, the consistent movement towards precision, of which the frequent use of 'en fait', or similar adverbial phrases, to clarify or offer further detail to a description, is a recurrent trope. For Noguez, the key to understanding Houellebecq's style is that '[il] a plusieurs cordes à son arc – une corde de poète, une corde d'essayiste (critique ou journaliste) et une corde de romancier'.⁴² Noguez concludes that 'l'une est plus centrale, plus médiane que les autres, c'est la corde de l'essayiste. Elle est probablement la vérité de son style'.⁴³ Houellebecq's style is frequently understated, yet marked by a critical or clarificatory movement, an observation which also reflects the spirit of Houellebecq's reviews and critical writing on topics as diverse as architecture and the music of Neil Young and the critical stance his novels appear to take towards contemporary society. Morrey's description of Houellebecq's style likewise suggests it should be looked at

⁴⁰ Olivier Bessard-Banquy, 'Le degré zéro de l'écriture selon Houellebecq', *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, pp. 357-365 (p. 357).

⁴¹ Dominique Noguez, 'Le Style de Michel Houellebecq', in *Houellebecq, en fait* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), p. 101.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

from various perspectives since his ‘writing switches frequently and disconcertingly between registers’.⁴⁴

Both Noguez and Morrey’s approaches to Houellebecq’s style make valuable critical observations. Noguez’s insistence on the ‘essayistic’ or the discursive as the ‘vérité’ of his style, as noted above, however, risks overlooking how the ‘corde de poète’ is equally an important aspect of his prose fiction, a point highlighted by David Evans.⁴⁵ Equally, while Morrey’s exploration of the shifting forms of Houellebecq’s writing is valid, it is also possible to consider his style in terms of the forms of poetic writing that persist throughout his fiction, as this study strives to do.⁴⁶

Houellebecq’s poetry has not yet been considered to any significant critical extent. Evans is the first critic to have engaged seriously with Houellebecq’s verse and his work informs my consideration of the poems in the following chapter. In particular, he has explored the relationship between the classical versified form of his poems and their more contemporary content. Evans has also suggested that ‘l’analyse de l’œuvre en prose est considérablement enrichie par une connaissance des *Poésies*’, but does not significantly develop this conclusion in relation to Houellebecq’s novels, hence it is a starting point on which the present study builds.⁴⁷

Equally, the relationship between the poems and Houellebecq’s fictive prose is an area that requires critical scrutiny. Houellebecq’s poems have been described as ‘indissociables des romans’ by Fabrice Gabriel and the relationship between the two

⁴⁴ Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, p. 35.

⁴⁵ As Evans has suggested, Houellebecq’s poetry is a lacuna in Noguez’s study: ‘Quand Dominique Noguez, lecteur sensible et enthousiaste des romans se tourne vers les poésies, ce n’est que pour reprocher à notre poètes ses “erreurs” de versification’, rather a full appreciation of its importance within Houellebecq’s *œuvre*. David Evans, “‘Et il y a un autre monde’: reconstructions formelles dans les *Poésies* de Houellebecq’, in *Le Monde de Houellebecq*, pp. 21-40 (p. 22).

⁴⁶ As Morrey also notes, the ‘complexity of the narrative voice in his novels’, can be attributed to ‘shifting focalization’ in Houellebecq’s narratives. This is a key stylistic feature Houellebecq’s writing and will be considered in detail in Chapter Three. Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, p. 35.

⁴⁷ David Evans, “‘Et il y a un autre monde’: reconstructions formelles dans les *Poésies* de Houellebecq’, p. 38.

forms of writing has been considered more closely by Delphine Grass.⁴⁸ Grass is correct to state that poetry is also a ‘central concern’ for Houellebecq’s novels since ‘in its aesthetic immediacy, it offers a radically different discourse on the self’s relationship with the world in comparison with contemporary norms of representation’ such as the discourses of consumer capitalist society, including novelistic prose.⁴⁹ In particular, Grass describes the poetry woven into Houellebecq’s prose fiction in terms of how it provides a form of resistance to the all-encompassing contemporary capitalist market. For her, poetic writing is ‘at the kernel of Houellebecq’s literary epistemological rebellion’ since it allows for a consideration of acutely subjective experience and ‘without its intuitive perception of the reality of social experience, the novel would sink into a deceptively realistic and uniform representation of free-market economy’.⁵⁰ Her study accordingly focuses largely on theorizing the status Houellebecq attributes to poetry and the poetic within his writing somewhat at the expense of a practical consideration of the stylistic techniques that bring about such a subjective experience in his work, a lacuna that the following chapters will address through close practical analysis. In this way, my approach also differs from Sweeney’s which asserts that Houellebecq’s writing ‘explicitly and unwaveringly disdains the solace of the poetic form’.⁵¹ I provide a close, and perhaps more optimistic, consideration of the role played by the poetic form in Houellebecq’s novels. Sweeney notes how Houellebecq’s work typifies what she describes as the death, or ‘end’ of affect within contemporary culture.⁵² This thesis considers how Houellebecq’s fiction evokes an experience of

⁴⁸ Fabrice Gabriel, ‘Poétique du ratage’, *Les Inrockuptibles Hors série Houellebecq*, 2005, pp. 24-25 (p. 25).

⁴⁹ Delphine Grass, ‘The Poetics of Humanity in the Novels of Michel Houellebecq’, (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College London, 2013), p. 21.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 179 & 173.

⁵¹ Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair*, p. 78. Sweeney here relates her comment to *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, but her remark reflects a broader critical tendency to understate the poetic form within Houellebecq’s prose.

⁵² ‘The focus of Houellebecq’s work [...] is [...] the ways in which the biopolitical processes of neoliberalism produce subjects in whom the idea of the self as a privatized entrepreneur, culturally,

reading and writing where the possibility of affect has not, at least not yet, completely disappeared.⁵³ Indeed, as I have noted above with reference to Bardolle, the emotional impact of Houellebecq's work is frequently appropriately described in terms of its *efficacité* and his writing can be read in terms of how it repeatedly uses poetic technique to affective ends.

2b. Intertextuality

Noguez also considers another important, and much-discussed, stylistic trait of Houellebecq's writing. He suggests the fiction is marked by intertextuality which he defines as '[les] rapports d'un texte donné avec un autre, antérieur'.⁵⁴ This has been a major area of examination for scholars of Houellebecq's fiction who have argued how it demonstrates both explicit and implicit intertextual references to literature and broader contemporary culture. Houellebecq has unambiguously cited the novels of H.P. Lovecraft as a key influence on his writing in an extended essay on the author.⁵⁵ Sabine van Wesemael notes a shared resistance to the modern world in the work of both writers,⁵⁶ while Houellebecq has described his adoption of Lovecraft's technique of combining different styles of writing, from newspaper-style reports to pseudo-scientific discourse in his own novels. The scope of the relationship between the two writers will be considered in detail in the following section of this introduction.

Lautréamont is another significant intertextual reference. There are, of course, clear differences between Houellebecq's novels and Lautréamont's densely fantastical prose poem *Les Chants de Maldoror*, for example, but the two writers have been joined at the level of technique by critics. Waldberg has, for example, accused Houellebecq of

emotionally, professionally and sexually, has become naturalized and in the process leaches away feelings of sublimity and pathos'. Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair*, p. 55.

⁵³ I prefer Jameson's 'waning of affect', as noted above, to Sweeney's 'end' of affect.

⁵⁴ Noguez, *Houellebecq, en fait*, p. 102. Noguez's conception of intertextuality has been, he writes, influenced by Julia Kristeva, Michel Riffaterre and Gérard Genette, but the definition he uses is a simplified version.

⁵⁵ Michel Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft. Contre le monde, contre la vie* (Paris: Rocher, 1991).

⁵⁶ Van Wesemael notes that, "Chez Houellebecq, comme chez Lovecraft, une haine absolue de la vie, aggravé d'un dégoût particulier pour le monde modern préexiste à toute littérature". *Michel Houellebecq, le plaisir du texte*, p. 18.

pastiche of his forebear,⁵⁷ and Murielle Lucie Clément has examined the relationship between the two writers more thoroughly, extending Noguez's analysis of Houellebecq's intertexts from the explicit to the implicit.⁵⁸ Clément correctly observes that there are stylistic echoes of Lautréamont in certain passages of Houellebecq, such as the incorporation of non-literary scientific discourse into his texts, something the author himself recognises as a hallmark of Lautréamont's writing.⁵⁹ Clément also makes pertinent comparisons of narrative structure between *Les Particules élémentaires*, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *City* (1952), a novel by the American science fiction writer Clifford D. Simak.⁶⁰ She notes that both the animal fiction of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and the narrative perspective of *Les Particules élémentaires*, where a post-human looks back at humanity from his vantage point in the future, directly evoke Simak's text. Clément's work is however undermined by a number of questionable observations such as of an implicit intertextual relationship between Clay, the central protagonist of Bret Easton Ellis' *Less Than Zero*, and Bruno in *Les Particules élémentaires* as well as the tenuous identification of traces of Shakespeare during a key scene where Bruno observes his mother's naked body as she sleeps.⁶¹ Van Wesemael also considers the intertextual in Houellebecq's work and convincingly demonstrates that *Extension du domaine de la lutte* can be read as a 'remake houellebecquien' of Émile Ajar/Romain Gary's *Gros-Câlin* (1974).⁶²

⁵⁷ Waldberg, *La Parole putanisée*, pp. 36-38.

⁵⁸ Murielle Lucie Clément, 'Michel Houellebecq. Ascendances littéraires et intertextualités', in *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, pp. 93-107.

⁵⁹ Houellebecq has referred to Lautréamont's incorporation of pre-existing non-literary discourses into his texts, as well as Perec's use of the technique, in his video response to accusations of plagiarism following the publication of *La Carte et le territoire*. 'Exclusif: la réponse de Michel Houellebecq aux accusations de plagiat', *NouvelObs.com*, 6 September 2010.

<<http://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/romans/20100906.BIB5594/exclusif-la-reponse-de-michel-houellebecq-aux-accusations-de-plagiat.html>> [accessed 17 February 2011].

⁶⁰ Translated into French as *Demain les chiens* (1953).

⁶¹ Clément, 'Michel Houellebecq. Ascendances littéraires et intertextualités', p. 97.

⁶² 'Pas seulement dans les thèmes (solitude, manque d'amour, aliénation, pessimisme) et les situations (entre autres l'achat d'un lit et le rendez-vous avec l'ami prêtre), mais également dans le ton et l'inspiration les deux romans sont parents quoiqu'il y ait aussi des différences fondamentales quant à l'idéologie sous-jacente. Ce sont les mêmes images et symboles, les mêmes personnages marginaux, la

A valuable consideration of the intertextual relationship between Houellebecq's fiction and the broader corpus of literature has been provided by Robert Dion and Élisabeth Haghebaert who have looked at the question from the perspective of genre.⁶³ For them, Houellebecq's work displays a 'poétique des genres' that emerges in the way his work adapts, hybridises and transposes contemporary genres:

l'originalité de Houellebecq se situera dans le fait de revendiquer l'absence ou, mieux, le refus, la négation de l'originalité: une non-originalité, comme en témoignent par exemple à l'omniscience caricaturale du narrateur ou le choix de ses personnages [...]. Ce qui compte pour l'auteur des *Particules élémentaires*, c'est, semble-t-il, moins l'invention des formes que l'imprévisibilité de leur enchaînement, qui lui permet de s'inscrire et de rester dans la logique postquantique qu'il met de l'avant.⁶⁴

A genre-based approach that examines the impact on Houellebecq's fiction as a whole would seem to be ultimately more rewarding than Clément's as it concentrates on the effects directly created within the novels. For Dion and Haghebaert, genre plays a similar role to language for Noguez in that it too is founded on the hybridisation of different forms. Houellebecq is here not an innovator, but his chosen stylistic approach, in this case the combination of existing, established traditions of writing such as the love story, science fiction, and the literary essay, is an appropriate mode of expression for the role it plays within the novel, in this case reflecting the complexities of quantum theory, a major thematic concern of *Les Particules élémentaires*. The question of genre is clearly important for a full critical appreciation of Houellebecq's fiction. Rather than how his novels' fluctuate between genres, as in Dion and Haghebaert's analysis, Chapter Four will consider how they consistently interrogate the *roman policier*.

2c. Houellebecq and the canon

Another key strand of critical attempts to contextualise Houellebecq's novels intertextually has examined his fiction in terms of its relationship to more traditionally

même volonté de questionner le rapport entre fiction et réalité qui hantent les deux textes'. Sabine van Wesemael, 'Fais-moi un gros câlin', *Michel Houellebecq à la une*, pp. 271-295 (p. 274).

⁶³ Robert Dion and Élisabeth Haghebaert, 'Le cas de Michel Houellebecq et la dynamique des genres littéraires', *French Studies*, 55:4 (2001), pp. 509-24.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 513.

canonical texts. Jean-Louis Cornille highlights the stylistic and thematic resonances that exist between Houellebecq's work and Camus' *L'Étranger*.⁶⁵ Bardolle considers a shared spirit or assertion of 'littérature à vif' in the work of Houellebecq and that of Céline and Proust, all of whom he describes as 'hommes en colère'.⁶⁶ The nineteenth century is also an important point of critical reference for Houellebecq, and as I will consider in the following chapter, the work of Baudelaire is a key point of reference. The nineteenth century novel is also highly important. This has, at least in part, been recognised by the author himself who, at various stages of his literary career, has praised the work of Balzac and Zola.⁶⁷ Viard draws parallels between the work of Houellebecq and Balzac, 'Houellebecq est bien un disciple de Balzac convaincu que le roman est investi de la passionnante responsabilité aristotélicienne de refléter mimétiquement les problèmes de la société'.⁶⁸ Houellebecq's novels clearly appear to remain true to the spirit of mimetic realism. *La Carte et le territoire*, for example, establishes a contemporary setting within which a wide range of the ills of contemporary society, from the issues associated with the treatment of the elderly to the touristification of France, are explicitly reflected. Sandrine Rabousseau is also correct to stress that parallels can be drawn between his approach to literature and Zola's naturalistic technique: 'Tous deux conçoivent le roman expérimental comme une provocation utile et salutaire, comme un texte programmé pour susciter une réception troublée, comme une arme de combat et de résistance'.⁶⁹ In particular, Rabousseau highlights the socially deterministic approach within both writers, particularly in their treatment of sexuality, noting: 'Dans l'univers romanesque de Houellebecq, les femmes

⁶⁵ Jean-Louis Cornille, 'Extension du domaine de la Littérature ou J'ai Lu *L'Étranger*', *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, pp. 133-143.

⁶⁶ Bardolle, *La Littérature à vif*, p. 72.

⁶⁷ Houellebecq described Balzac as 'un écrivain idéal' in Didier Sénecal, 'Entretien avec Michel Houellebecq', p. 32. In interview, Houellebecq has claimed 'l'héritage zolien', Interview with Laure Adler, 30 September 2005, Arte.

⁶⁸ Bruno Viard, 'Faut-il rire ou en pleurer? Michel Houellebecq du côté de Marcel Mauss et du côté de Balzac' in *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, pp 31-42 (p. 37).

⁶⁹ Sandrine Rabousseau, 'Michel Houellebecq, un romancier "néo-naturaliste"', *Le Monde de Houellebecq*, pp. 105-113 (p. 108).

peuvent réussir socialement par leur pouvoir de séduction dans la sphère privée ou professionnelle et connaître la même destinée que Nana, qui triomphe sous le second Empire'.⁷⁰

2d. Postnaturalism and the contemporary literary sphere

Building on this approach, critics have considered Houellebecq's novels in terms of what has controversially been termed 'postnaturalisme', a contemporary reworking of Zola's naturalism. In an influential essay published during the 1998 *rentrée littéraire* in *Le Monde*, Frédéric Badré, then editorial director of the journal *Ligne de risque*, was critical of contemporary criticism while heralding the arrival of a new literary movement, exemplified by Houellebecq, Marie Darrieussecq and Iégor Gran, that provides a radical overhaul to the classic realist novel, and so requires a new critical label:

La nouvelle tendance est postnaturaliste. Car à la différence de l'époque de Zola, son réel est en décomposition avancée. L'humanité est soumise à l'absurdité fondamentale que représente la falsification du réel. La mise à nu de la misère moderne (sociale, idéologique, artistique) est opérée avec la volonté, en particulier chez Houellebecq, que les intuitions du romancier trouvent un cadre dans la science. Leur regard est clinique.⁷¹

Badré makes a different claim for the discourse of science to Clément as considered above. Rather than a homage to Lautréamont, he sees it as a crucial stylistic approach that Houellebecq uses to accentuate his characters' alienation from the contemporary world. More broadly, Badré identifies an anti-aesthetic and anti-humanistic approach amongst the contemporary 'postnaturalist' novelists which reflects their pessimistic assessments of the state of contemporary society: 'Leur forme romanesque est sans esthétisme, sans pudeur, sans séduction particulièrement artiste. Ils ont tout simplement compris que la beauté ne peut plus être représentée puisqu'elle n'existe plus'.⁷² For Badré, whilst these novelists share a realist concern for contemporary reality, the

⁷⁰ Rabousseau, 'Michel Houellebecq, un romancier "néo-naturaliste"', p. 109.

⁷¹ Frédéric Badré, 'Une nouvelle tendance en littérature', *Le Monde*, 3 October 1998.

⁷² Ibid.

postnaturalist writer is marked by the disaffection of the individual subject that accompanies the decomposition of modernity rather than its establishment as portrayed in the work of their nineteenth century forebears. Such a conclusion appears justified by a reading of *Plateforme* where the network of sex resorts masterminded by Michel, Jean-Yves and Valérie, with the aim of fulfilling the sexual desire of the West and providing an organised platform for members of the third world to monetise their sexuality can be regarded as symptomatic of modernity to the same extent as the department store or the factory. These temples to sexuality and efficiency are thus inevitably blown up by terrorists, their pleasure-seeking customers reduced to a pile of bloody limbs in a bomb attack which is an archetypal postnaturalist gesture as society and its institutions are ultimately broken down and destroyed rather than being constructed or celebrated.⁷³

Badré's article stimulated contemporary critical debate within the French literary community, much of it challenging this conception of a new literary movement. Philippe di Folco, for example, writing in the following week's *Le Monde* accused Badré of a failure of critical judgement and being blinded by 'le marketing malin des programmes éditoriaux'.⁷⁴ Indeed, the marketing of Houellebecq's work has been a consistent concern for many of his critics, as I will presently consider. In the same edition of the newspaper, Marc Petit was particularly scathing, attacking Badré and even going so far as to make a comparison with Hitler and Stalin whom, he claims shared a similarly reductive view of literature, 'le postnaturalisme, dont Frédéric Badré se fait le chantre, dénie, si je l'entends bien, à l'art tout autre mission que celle de reproduire les choses en pire'.⁷⁵

⁷³ Destruction and decomposition are frequently recurring motifs in the postnaturalist novel. Marie Darrieussecq's *Truismes* (1996), for example, is concerned with a female protagonist slowly mutating into a pig against the background of a slowly disintegrating Paris.

⁷⁴ Philippe di Folco, 'Résister, encore et toujours', *Le Monde*, 10 October 1998.

⁷⁵ Marc Petit, 'Nouvelle tendance, vieux démons', *Le Monde*, 10 October 1998.

Despite the critical disagreements about the accuracy and suitability of Badré's analysis, the concept of 'postnaturalism' has passed into critical currency and appears to have endured. In a 2010 *Le Figaro Magazine* profile of Houellebecq, novelist and close friend, Frédéric Beigbeder describes a 1996 editorial meeting of *L'Atelier du roman* that included the pair, in addition to Milan Kundera, François Taillandier and Michel Déon, amongst others as 'un rassemblement de tous les romanciers postnaturalistes dans la même pièce. Vous faisiez sauter une bombe ce soir-là et la narration néobalzacienne en prenait un coup pendant quelques décennies'.⁷⁶ While Beigbeder is typically playful here, and the postnaturalist epithet is arguably only partially applicable to the authors he cites, his quote does demonstrate both an acceptance of the postnaturalist description, but also, the 'néobalzacien' reference equally suggests a level of critical uncertainty about what the word 'postnaturaliste' actually defines.⁷⁷

Houellebecq's work has also been critically considered in terms of what it reveals about the broader French literary and media landscapes. Naulleau argues that Houellebecq's critical and commercial success can be largely attributed to failures of judgement stemming from the increasing commercialisation of the literary sphere. He has remarked on the critical trend, noted above, towards the 'occultation de l'œuvre par l'homme'.⁷⁸ In addition, he notes a 'crise de la verticalité', which he relates to 'la perte de mémoire littéraire, à la disparition des repères, à une remise en cause de la notion

⁷⁶ Frédéric Beigbeder, 'Houellebecq, portrait d'un iconoclaste', p. 31.

⁷⁷ In his article, Badré was careful to differentiate his term from the prefix 'néo', implying postnaturalism is an evolution, rather than a return to lost literary styles. While 'postnaturaliste' is arguably the most common literary sub-group with which Houellebecq is critically aligned, he has also been described as an exponent of the 'extrême contemporain', defined by Alain-Philippe Durand and Naomi Mandel as contemporary novels that 'do not merely reflect on violence, they seek it out, engage it and, in a variety of imaginative ways, perform it'. Alain-Philippe Durand and Naomi Mandel, 'Introduction' to *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme*, ed. by Alain-Philippe Durand and Naomi Mandel (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 1-5 (p. 1). Van Wesemael has similarly described him as a purveyor of what she describes as the 'roman transgressif contemporain': 'une forme de littérature qui abolit, contredit, renverse ou présente, de quelque manière que ce soit, une alternative pour des codes culturels communément acceptés, des normes et des valeurs, qu'elles soient linguistiques, littéraires ou artistiques, morales, sociales ou politiques'. Sabine van Wesemael, *Le Roman transgressif contemporain: de Bret Easton Ellis à Michel Houellebecq* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010), p. 33.

⁷⁸ Naulleau, *Au secours, Houellebecq revient!*, p. 33.

même de tradition’.⁷⁹ Naulleau has also described the ‘l’avènement d’un capitalisme littéraire’, where literary marketing, specifically by publishing houses with the financial backing to make a significant impact, has a direct relationship with critical and commercial success.⁸⁰ As an illustration, Naulleau repeatedly turns to the release of *La Possibilité d’une île* which for him was effectively released as ‘un livre virtuel’, since many media critics were prevented from reading the book in advance of publication, generating a media buzz that made the book and the author the stars of the 2005 *rentrée littéraire* without it necessarily being reviewed.⁸¹

Ruth Cruickshank has turned to Houellebecq’s texts in greater detail and considers elements of the provocative discourses within Houellebecq’s fiction within the broader context of her examination of *fin de millénaire* French fiction.⁸² She reads Houellebecq’s work in terms of how it mirrors the broader crises of society at the ‘turning point’ at the end of the twentieth century and how the author mobilises contemporary crisis discourses in his texts, such as the discourses of ‘the global markets and the mass media’ including neo-liberalism, psychoanalysis and political correctness.⁸³ Cruickshank consequently examines the provocations of Houellebecq’s fiction in context with their extra-textual scandals:

Houellebecq’s fiction [displays] what seems to be a pre-emptive attempt to manipulate the inevitable inscription of his fiction in the order of the media. In other words, by playing on its own ambivalence, *Les Particules* takes the risk of perpetuating the norms and conventions that it portrays in an attempt to radically challenge them. Yet in doing so, it is caught in a mediatized double bind made all the greater by Houellebecq’s failure to problematize the discourses apparently designed to provoke both within and beyond his prose fictions.⁸⁴

In this way, Cruickshank introduces the possibility that the provocative discourses of misogyny and racism present in Houellebecq’s novel are part of an overall critical

⁷⁹ Naulleau, *Au secours, Houellebecq revient!*, p. 48.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁸² Ruth Cruickshank, *Fin de millénaire French fiction: the aesthetics of crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

position, a convincing argument given that, as I have suggested above, there is a clear element of social critique at the heart of Houellebecq's writing. Cruickshank's analysis suggests that the provocative statements in *Les Particules élémentaires*, because of the way they are not critiqued or undermined explicitly in the text, cannot be easily recuperated into mainstream critical discourse and are instead brought into violent collision with them, as evidenced, for example, by the 1998 and 2001 Houellebecq *affaires*, noted above. In her analysis of those affairs, Cruickshank borrows a term from Dominic LaCapra's analysis of the nineteenth-century *Madame Bovary* trial: for Cruickshank the 'ideological crime' perpetuated by *Les Particules élémentaires* is an attempt to 'destabilize the dominant values not only of the French field of literary production, but also those of mass media and neoliberalism'.⁸⁵ For Cruickshank, Houellebecq's provocative statements thus retain a transgressive charge since they finally 'resist the appropriation and commodification by the system they seek to challenge', yet are paradoxically concurrently and marketed as profitable commodities.⁸⁶ While Cruickshank's assessment is valid in that it pertinently considers Houellebecq's work in terms of its status as successful commercial product and social phenomenon, such an analysis tends to overlook the both the author's capacity to impose his own individual style on his work and the relationship between the text and its reader, both of which are at the heart of my analysis.

2e. Houellebecquian sex

In addition, many critical studies of Houellebecq have focussed on the sex in his fiction. As well as the distinctive sex scenes in his novels, critics have considered the role played by desire in contemporary society and gender relations and the author's ideological standpoints in relation to them. The sex scenes in much of his work, explicit, yet generally conforming to the rules of mainstream heterosexual pornography,

⁸⁵ Cruickshank, *Fin de millénaire French fiction*, p. 160

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

have been noted by many media critics.⁸⁷ English speaking critics have been particularly struck by what they have described deridingly as ‘pornography’. Andrew Marr, writing in *The Observer*, for example, remarks on the ‘long and arid tracts of anti-erotic pornography – descriptions of relentless, joyless, pointless sex which are a real grind to read’ in *Atomised*, the English translation of *Les Particules élémentaires*. Stephen Goode in the *Washington Post*, notes: ‘At times – and those times are frequent – *The Elementary Particles* is indistinguishable from pornography’.⁸⁸ Stressing the sexual content of Houellebecq’s work appears to have been a deliberate marketing decision, in the UK at least, with scantily clad women adorning the covers of *Atomised* and *Plateforme*. Observations of this sort are largely lacking from French reviewers, but on the book’s release, French anti-pornography and pro-‘valeurs Judéo-chrétiennes’ pressure group Promouvoir pressed for legal action against Flammarion, publishers of *Plateforme*, because of what they described as the book’s pornographic nature.⁸⁹ The group lodged a complaint against ‘plusieurs articles du code pénal qui visent à sanctionner l’atteinte à la dignité humaine ou la corruption de mineur’.⁹⁰

Scholars have also examined the role played by the sex in Houellebecq’s work.

Franc Schuerewegen speculates that the sexual encounters in *Plateforme* are largely

⁸⁷ Examples of this type abound within French writing. For example, Emmanuelle Arsan, *Emmanuelle* (Paris: La Musardine, 2008) is a classic of the genre. A study that considers the emotional impact of Houellebecq’s work could arguably consider how Houellebecq’s sex scenes create a similar arousing or titillating effect on the reader to that created by pornography. This equates with what Virginie Despentes describes as the ‘dimension quasi mystique’ of pornography whereby ‘Il s’adresse directement aux centres des fantasmes, sans passer par la parole, ni par la réflexion. D’abord on bande ou on mouille, ensuite on peut se demander pourquoi. Les réflexes d’autocensure sont bousculés. L’image porno ne nous laisse pas le choix: voilà ce qui t’excite, voilà ce qui te fait réagir’. Virginie Despentes, *King Kong Théorie* (Paris: Grasset, 2006), p. 91. The emotional aspect of sexual excitement is clarified by Barry Singer who, in his work on arousal, stresses the role played by emotion in this process. Barry Singer, ‘Conceptualizing Sexual Arousal and Attraction’, *The Journal of Sex Research*, 20:3 (1984), pp. 230-240. This capacity of pornographic writing will not be developed further here since it is beyond the scope of the present study.

⁸⁸ Andrew Marr, ‘We’re all doomed (middle-aged French philosophers excepted)’, *The Observer*, Review section, 21 May 2000, p. 12, and Stephen Goode, ‘A bad boy’s return’, *Washington Post*, Book section, 27 July 2003, p. 6. Another vociferous critic of Houellebecq’s pornography has been his estranged mother, Lucie Ceccaldi: ‘If it hadn’t been my son, I wouldn’t read that kind of crap, I would put it down straight away, because if there’s one thing I detest in the world it’s pornography. That book is pure pornography, it’s repugnant, its crap.’ Angelique Chrisafis, “I never left anybody. It was him that left me”, *The Guardian*, G2 section, 7 May 2008, p. 4.

⁸⁹ Promouvoir website <<http://www.lemediateur.net/promouvoir/index.htm>> [accessed 24 March, 2011].

⁹⁰ ‘Le roman de Michel Houellebecq *Plateforme* attaqué en justice’, *Le Monde*, 20 October 2001.

designed to ‘exciter les appétits sexuels du lecteur’, while stressing their conservatism, and argues that they suggest an intertextual relationship with the ‘best-seller anglo-saxon merdique’ written by the likes of Frederick Forsyth and John Grisham.⁹¹ Most interestingly, Schuerewegen suggests that the interchangeability of the scenes of sex in the work, as well as the overall blandness as noted by Marr above, reflect a postmodern sensibility in Houellebecq’s writing: ‘On définit souvent le courant post-moderne en littérature comme une mise à plat des discours et, donc, comme un refus de toute spécificité discursive’, a flattening that echoes the lack of humanity in postnaturalist writing noted by Badré considered above.⁹² Even the ‘médiante’, as identified by Noguez in Houellebecq’s language can be found in Houellebecq’s sex scenes. The first coupling of Michel and Valérie in *Plateforme*, for example, is typically downplayed:

Je posai les mains sur sa taille, approchai mon visage du sien. Elle ouvrit les lèvres, glissa tout de suite sa langue dans ma bouche. Je fus traversé par une excitation violente, à la limite de l’évanouissement, je me mis aussitôt à bander.⁹³

Despite the physical intimacy, there is a sense of clinical detachment in the language used. Michel’s ‘excitation violente’ is expressed in a particularly downbeat manner. The relationship of emotional distancing of the sexual act has been a point noted recurrently by Houellebecq’s critics and is key to his fiction. Many of the critics who have examined his work have identified the paradoxical relationship between physical intimacy and the acute potential for emotional alienation it provides. Morrey has pertinently argued that while Houellebecq’s work displays a preoccupation with sex, the ‘focus in his work is largely on individuals deprived of sex or excluded from the sexual sphere and that, from this perspective, the world of sexuality appears singularly oppressive’.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Franc Schuerewegen, ‘Scènes de cul’, in *Michel Houellebecq*, ed. by Sabine van Wesemael, pp. 91-98 (p. 92). Houellebecq, *Plateforme* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001), p. 38.

⁹² Schuerewegen, ‘Scènes de cul’, p. 96.

⁹³ Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, p. 144.

⁹⁴ Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, p. 13.

Perhaps the most effective considerations of sex in Houellebecq's fiction consider its relationship to economics. In particular, how sexuality has been given an illusory veneer by the liberal markets that regulate contemporary capitalism. This takes the form of a postmodern libidinal economy within which everyone, in the theory propagated by contemporary media, has access via consumerism to a fulfilling, varied, exciting sex life. In reality, however, as Houellebecq demonstrates repeatedly throughout his work, this is restricted to the young, the attractive and the rich. Those of us unlucky enough to be none of these are inevitably frustrated, resentful and unhappy. This is a key strand that is developed to varying degrees throughout all of Houellebecq's novels and is described by Cruickshank as 'a bleak theory according to which, in an ostensibly post-ideological world, all individuals have "une valeur d'échange", determined not only by their economic status, but also by their sexual attractiveness',⁹⁵ and succinctly described by Morrey as the "economisation" of sexuality'.⁹⁶ In *Extension du domaine de la lutte* it is neatly formulated: 'La sexualité est un système de hiérarchie sociale'.⁹⁷ In the same novel, it is articulated and exemplified by Tisserand, the narrator's colleague, an unattractive 28-year-old virgin who despondently declares that, despite his earning potential, 'J'ai l'impression d'être une cuisse de poulet sous cellophane dans un rayon de supermarché'.⁹⁸ Tisserand thus epitomises the frustrating sense of separation felt by those who are disenfranchised by the sexual economy.

The effects of this libidinal economy are felt throughout Houellebecq's novels. They are demonstrated most explicitly in the group sex scenes of *Les Particules élémentaires* which serve as a microcosm of the broader sexual world: the young and attractive have their pick of available partners, whereas the old and ugly are reduced to

⁹⁵ Ruth Cruickshank, 'Sex, shopping and psychoanalysis: Houellebecq and therapy', *Le Monde de Houellebecq*, pp. 199-212 (p. 199).

⁹⁶ Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, p. 13

⁹⁷ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (Paris: Éditions Maurice Nadeau, 1994), p. 93.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

solitary masturbation.⁹⁹ *Plateforme* appears to posit a solution to this problem through the consideration of a global network of sex resorts, legitimised by the involvement of a major hotel chain. Both *La Possibilité d'une île* and *La Carte et le territoire*, the novel in which the explicit sexual element of Houellebecq's fiction is least evident, explore how protagonists, notably comedian Daniell and artist Jed Martin, gradually slip to lower positions within the sexual hierarchy, despite their commercial successes, as a result of growing old.

Houellebecq's approach to sex has been explored convincingly by Morrey who examines how it relates to the portrayal of gender in his novels. Of *Plateforme*, Morrey notes the novel's explicit sexism and suggests Houellebecq's 'view of the crippled sexuality of the West seems to be based, in no small amount, on his resentment of the social, sexual, and economic gains made by women over the past three decades or so'.¹⁰⁰ This is an observation that is also clearly true of Houellebecq's fiction more broadly. Morrey notes the 'casual, apparently unthinking, sexism' of much of Houellebecq's writing and Nancy Huston has described 'la misogynie houellebecquienne'.¹⁰¹ It can be argued, for example, that Christiane, Annabelle and Janine from *Les Particules élémentaires* and Valérie of *Plateforme* are 'punished' for their own liberated sexualities – they all have multiple sexual partners and, in Annabelle's case two abortions – by being killed off in the text.¹⁰² Male characters, on the other hand, are consistently striving for repeated sexual encounters. There is arguably a clumsy attempt to redress the balance in *La Carte et le territoire* as Jed

⁹⁹ 'Au Cap d'Agde comme ailleurs un individu obèse, vieillissant ou disgracieux sera condamné à la masturbation – à ceci près que cette activité, en général proscrite dans les lieux publics, sera ici considérée avec une aimable bienveillance'. Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), p. 275.

¹⁰⁰ Douglas Morrey, 'Michel Houellebecq and the International Sexual Economy', *Portal*, 1:1 (2004), <<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/portal/article/download/44/22>> [accessed 17 January 2011], p. 2.

¹⁰¹ Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, p. 16; Nancy Huston, 'L'extase du dégoût: Michel Houellebecq', in *Professeurs de désespoir* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2004), pp. 279-300 (p. 296).

¹⁰² Huston has noted that while certain female characters are sympathetically described, 'on peut être certain que la suite de l'histoire réservera à son corps une destruction horrible'. *Ibid.*, p. 292.

Martin's female press officer is presented as having a fulfilling sex life, a rarity in Houellebecq's fiction, by taking trips to Jamaica to sleep with local men.¹⁰³ Morrey also notes, however, that Houellebecq's work ultimately presents a picture of how both women and men are damaged to an equal extent by the sexual economy. In relation to Houellebecq's males he observes a challenge to 'hegemonic masculinity',¹⁰⁴ and elsewhere notes, 'even as we pity them, we ought to recognize that these men find themselves in a situation that has been familiar to women for centuries: that of being reduced to an object with an exchange value within a relentless traffic where what is at stake is the right of access to bodies'.¹⁰⁵ The freedoms supposedly 'won' by the generation of 1968 were largely concerned with women's rights but it is ultimately both men and women that have been damaged by their exploitation. Both Isabelle and Daniell in *La Possibilité d'une île* kill themselves after growing old and being rejected by a youth-worshipping society, ironically one Isabelle has helped to manufacture in her role as teen magazine editor, which has left them old, undesirable and alone.

2f. Houellebecq and ideas

The way Houellebecq's novels explore various ideological positions is also crucial for a comprehensive critical study of his work. Indeed, the relationship of Houellebecq's fiction to ideas has been a major critical concern. As noted above, Morrey has read him as a posthuman thinker and Sweeney demonstrates how his novels can be understood in context with contemporary discourses of economic, social and individual neoliberalism.¹⁰⁶ We have already seen how critics have approached the abundant intertextuality of his fiction with regards to literature, but a reading of Houellebecq's

¹⁰³ Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), p. 156.

¹⁰⁴ Morrey, 'Michel Houellebecq and the International Sexual Economy', p. 27.

¹⁰⁵ Morrey, 'Sex and the single male: Houellebecq, feminism and hegemonic masculinity', *Yale French Studies*, 116-117 (2009), pp. 141-152 (p. 152).

¹⁰⁶ 'Houellebecq's writing charts the transformation of subjectivity enacted by neoliberalism in which it imprints the macro-economic system on the private psycho-social domain, which then gradually permeates and subsumes every social, sexual and familial relation'. Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair*, p. 46. Sweeney's work also considers Houellebecq's relationship with the legacy of 1968 in French society which will not be considered in detail here.

novels also reveals equally recurrent and explicit references to thinkers and philosophers in his work, many of whose ideas have become outmoded, discredited or unfashionable. In *La Carte et le territoire*, for example, the artist Jed Martin visits Michel Houellebecq's home in Ireland and surveys the bookshelf:

Jed se plongea dans l'examen de la bibliothèque, fut surpris par le petit nombre de romans - des classiques, essentiellement. Il y avait par contre un nombre étonnant d'ouvrages dus aux réformateurs sociaux du XIXe siècle: les plus connus, comme Marx, Proudhon et Comte; mais aussi Fourier, Cabet, Saint-Simon, Pierre Leroux, Owen, Carlyle, ainsi que d'autres qui ne lui évoquaient à peu près rien. L'auteur revint, portant sur un plateau une cafetière, des macarons, une bouteille d'alcool de prune. "Vous savez ce qu'affirme Comte", dit-il, "que l'humanité est composée de davantage de morts que de vivants. Eh bien j'en suis là, maintenant, je suis surtout en contact avec des morts..."¹⁰⁷

Philosophers, such as those referenced in this extract, are referenced throughout Houellebecq's fiction, but also in his critical writing and interviews.¹⁰⁸ Viard demonstrates how Houellebecq's writing has its precedents within the nineteenth century through 'les allusions et les citations de philosophes [et] de réformateurs sociaux', alongside the poets and novelists noted above.¹⁰⁹ Gerald Moore argues how his work can be read in terms of the dialogue it maintains with Nietzsche.¹¹⁰ Walter Wagner asserts the importance of Schopenhauer within Houellebecq's work as 'un de ses maîtres spirituels'.¹¹¹ In addition, Houellebecq's fiction regularly tackles complex philosophical or ethical issues. *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d'une île* can be read respectively as a consideration of the potential that eugenics and cryogenics

¹⁰⁷ Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 182.

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, Houellebecq's writing about Charles Fourier: Houellebecq, 'Sexualité bien ordonnée', *Les Inrockuptibles Hors série Houellebecq*, 2005, pp. 96-97 and a series of essays about Schopenhauer online at *Mediapart*, Houellebecq, 'En présence de Schopenhauer', *Mediapart*, <<http://www.mediapart.fr/club/edition/bookclub/article/010210/en-presence-de-schopenhauer-15>>, [accessed 17 January 2010]. In addition, for an analysis of the role played by Auguste Comte in Houellebecq's fiction see Eric Sartori, 'Michel Houellebecq, romancier positiviste', in *Michel Houellebecq*, ed. by Sabine van Wesemael, pp. 143-151.

¹⁰⁹ Viard cites Comte, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Alexis de Tocqueville, Charles Fourier, Saint-Simon, Pierre Leroux and Karl Marx. Bruno Viard, *Les Tiroirs de Michel Houellebecq*, p. 8.

¹¹⁰ 'Houellebecq [is] caught between irony and earnest sentimentality, between Nietzsche and his renunciation, in an eternal return that brings him repeatedly back to the same place, monomaniacally and, crucially, impossibly seeking to rid himself of Nietzsche's ghosts'. Gerald Moore, 'Gay science and (no) laughing matter: The eternal returns of Michel Houellebecq', *French Studies*, 65:1 (2011), 45-60 (p. 47).

¹¹¹ Walter Wagner, 'Le bonheur du néant: une lecture schopenhauerienne de Houellebecq', in *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, pp. 109-122 (p. 109).

have to improve humanity and offer eternal life. Grass suggests that the latter text ‘frames ontological anxieties about the meaning of humanity in the context of post-Fordist biopolitics’.¹¹² In addition *Plateforme* can be seen to tackle the ethics of sex tourism while *La Carte et le territoire* considers the moral acceptability of assisted suicide amongst other issues including the touristification of France. *Extension du domaine de la lutte* also includes extracts from the narrator’s own philosophical animal fictions which appear as a *mise-en-abyme* within the text.¹¹³

The preoccupation of Houellebecq’s writing with philosophical questions has resulted in some critics taking his texts’ often provocative assertions at face value. The extent to which Houellebecq should be regarded as novelist, thinker or both is something that critics of his work have found particularly problematic. As noted above, Nicolas Bourriaud and the editorial board of *Perpétuaire* ejected Houellebecq from the publication after ‘ideological differences’ in an affair that is symptomatic of many critical responses to his work. This took place after the board had seen extracts of *Les Particules élémentaires* prior to publication and interviewed the author about his ideological positions, the results of which were published in the journal following his dismissal.¹¹⁴ In an article for *Le Monde*, ‘L’ère du flou’, *Perpétuaire* justified its decision to oust Houellebecq, citing his lack of transparency about his ideological standpoint and describing him as ‘un écrivain persuadé que la science détient la vérité, que les valeurs de l’Occident catholique se perdent, que le racisme n’est pas un problème, qu’il faut organiser politiquement le désir et que l’avortement est un eugénisme négatif par opposition à l’eugénisme positif qu’il appelle de ses vœux’.¹¹⁵

All of these points of view are considered in *Les Particules élémentaires* but this

¹¹² Delphine Grass, ‘Domesticating Hierarchies, Eugenic Hygiene and Exclusion Zones: The Dogs and Clones of Houellebecq’s *La Possibilité d’une île*’, *L’Esprit Créateur*, 52:2 (2012), 127–140 (p. 127).

¹¹³ For a more detailed consideration of the role played by the animal fiction in the novel see Robert Dion, ‘Faire la bête. Les fictions animalières dans *Extension du domaine de la lutte*’, in Michel Houellebecq, ed. by Sabine van Wesemael, p. 55-66.

¹¹⁴ Houellebecq, “‘Je crois peu en la liberté’”. Entretien’, *Perpétuaire*, 11, September 1998, pp. 6-23.

¹¹⁵ Nicolas Bourriaud, Christophe Duchatelet, Jean-Yves Jouannais, Christophe Kihm, Jacques-François Marchandise and Laurent Quintreau, ‘Houellebecq et l’ère du flou’, *Le Monde*, 10 October 1998, p. 16.

naturally raises a key challenge for critics of Houellebecq's work: to what extent should the author be held directly to account for the ideas presented in his fiction? In Chapter Three below I argue that Houellebecq's writing is marked by a tonal undecidability that exploits such ambiguity and is a key feature of his style.

In a similar way, some critics have described this novel as a *roman à thèse*, which would seem to suggest a conclusion that the ideological arguments they present are most appropriately received unambiguously.¹¹⁶ Susan Suleiman defines a *roman à thèse* as, 'a novel written in the realistic mode (that is, based on an aesthetic of verisimilitude and representation), which signals itself to the reader as primarily didactic in intent, seeking to demonstrate the validity of a political, philosophical or religious doctrine'.¹¹⁷ If Houellebecq's work is to be understood along these lines, then, following Suleiman's definition, then this naturally calls into question the extent to which we take Houellebecq at his word. On one hand, it arguably encourages us to read *La Possibilité d'une île* and *Les Particules élémentaires* as celebrations of the potential contemporary science has to change the future course of humanity and *Plateforme* as a showcase for the benefits of global sex tourism. On the other hand, however, it raises the possibility that we understand the polar opposite: that there is a satirical and critical intent within what initially appear to be ideologically-charged novels.¹¹⁸

It is, perhaps, most appropriate to view the status of Houellebecq's novels as *romans à thèses* as ambiguous since it is problematic to navigate the line between satire and didactic intent in his fiction if discovering a consistent line of Houellebecqian 'thought' is the intention. Altes thus correctly concludes that the *roman à thèse* definition is not appropriate to describe *Les Particule élémentaires*: 'L'on ferait tort

¹¹⁶ Including Jack. I Abecassis, 'The Eclipse of desire: L'Affaire Houellebecq', *MLN*, 115:4 (2000), 801-826 (p. 802).

¹¹⁷ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 7.

¹¹⁸ The *Perpendiculaire* editorial committee appears to have read *Les Particules élémentaires* in the first manner, as did the travel guide firm Routard which objected to its depiction in *Plateforme*. Patrick Gloaguen, the company founder released a statement clarifying that Routard was 'fier d'être contre la prostitution en Thaïland'. 'Le Routard s'en prend à Michel Houellebecq', *Le Monde*, 22 August 2001.

[...] à ce roman si on le réduisait à cette portée persuasive univoque'.¹¹⁹ Altes sees a key subversion of the *roman à thèse*, it being one form of the novel amongst others, the novel is composed of 'un montage complexe de perspectives axiologiques et affectives incompatibles, il n'est pas étonnant que l'écriture de Houellebecq produise un effet de flou, et suscite le soupçon d'ironie, voire de parodie'.¹²⁰ The 'flou', the vagueness that the editorial board of *Perpendiculaire* identified within Houellebecq's work, is a key stylistic component of his fiction and one which will be considered in the following analysis. It also underlines the fact that Houellebecq is perhaps best appreciated as a novelist for whom humour, in terms of such stylistic irony, plays a crucial role, rather than exclusively a thinker on his own terms.

Indeed, critics of Houellebecq's work have fallen into the trap of taking Houellebecq's controversial statements at face value, and thus missing the challenges of the text themselves. A common critical error therefore focuses on the provocative aspects of a text, to the extent that it clouds a reading of the text overall. Writing about *Plateforme*, Abdel-Allah Salhi concluded in the French *Libération* shortly after its publication that the novel is fundamentally racist, accusing the author of presenting his own unframed opinions, 'grâce à des écrivains comme Houellebecq, la haine raciale [...] devienne carrément tendance, chic et tolérable au lieu d'être tout simplement ce qu'elle est: une attitude honteuse et dégradante, ça, c'est tout simplement abject'.¹²¹ Leaving aside Sahli's assumptions regarding authorial intention, this is of course a valid response to the viewpoints presented in *Plateforme* in isolation but is ultimately a reductive analysis since it negates any critical claims for parody, satire or criticism present in the novel, ultimately denying the text's literary status, turning it into little more than a political or ideological pamphlet. Such a conception of Houellebecq as pamphleteer would appear to support Noguez's celebration of the writer as essayist, but

¹¹⁹ Liesbeth Korthals Altes, 'Persuasion et ambiguïté dans un roman à thèse postmoderne', p. 34.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 38.

¹²¹ Abdel-Allah Salhi, 'Un racisme chic et tendance', *Libération*, 4 September 2001, p. 6.

the present study argues that whereas the essay genre is typically marked by its persuasion, opinion or clarification, in Noguez and Sahli's understanding at least, Houellebecq's work can be read in terms of the affective emotional responses, rather than reasoned contemplation, it demands from its readers.

3. Houellebecq on writing: 'La participation émotive'

There is, then, more to Houellebecq's writing than pure provocation or social critique and, indeed, the philosophical ideas, intertextual references or sex. As I have outlined above, this thesis provides an insight into the author's literary style and reconsiders conclusions that his writing is essayistic, 'plat' or displays an 'absence totale de poésie'. It asserts how his work engages the reader by creating highly ambiguous and emotionally suggestive effects through techniques that risk being overlooked by critics who restrict themselves to intertextual, socio-political or gender-based approaches. In particular, it will interrogate Bardolle's claim that 'C'est [l']émotion qui accroche le public de Houellebecq, cette profonde empathie qui lui confère un cortège de lecteurs fanatiques'.¹²² In this way, and to an extent not previously considered by critics of his work, I demonstrate that a continuity can be established between the techniques and images of Houellebecq's earliest poetry and his later prose and suggest that the 'poetic' should be ranked critically alongside the 'essayistic' highlighted by Noguez, as considered above, as a distinctive characteristic of his prose style.

This section attempts to elucidate the major creative principles of the poetics that informs Houellebecq's work. He has articulated this poetics in three of his earliest essays on literature where he has consistently stressed the relationship between two forms of writing: poetry and prose. I here interrogate Houellebecq's use of the term 'poetry' and elaborate what his use of the term suggests. I argue that in addition to versified poetry, Houellebecq also uses it to suggest a poetic mode of perception for the

¹²² Bardolle, *La Littérature à vif*, p. 54.

individual subject. For Houellebecq, ‘poetry’ can also describe a quality of writing not restricted to formal poetry that creates a sense of emotional ‘enchantment’ for the reader. Houellebecq describes this quality of language as ‘pathétique’ using a vocabulary that resonates with the work of poetry theorist Jean Cohen, a writer for whose work he has expressed his admiration. In the subsequent chapters of this thesis, I will demonstrate how this ‘pathétique’ is generated, and ultimately complicated, throughout Houellebecq’s poetry and prose.

In this section, I argue that, despite Houellebecq’s suspicion of theoretical approaches to literature, a consistent theoretical strand underpins his writing about writing where the relationship between ‘poetic’ emotionality and ‘prosaic’ reason is repeatedly interrogated. This section considers both Cohen’s work and Houellebecq’s writing on Cohen, highlighting what Houellebecq has appreciated in the work of the theorist. This will be followed by a brief consideration of the work of Jenefer Robinson who has argued for the place of a reader’s emotional engagement within a critical appreciation of literature and whose work also informs my approach. The subsequent section considers how Houellebecq has articulated his theory of writing where emotion plays a crucial role. In particular, I argue that Houellebecq specifies a precise spectrum of emotions that can be shared with the readers of his work. The final section of this chapter will demonstrate that Houellebecq has described how the ‘pathétique’ is complemented and contrasted within his writing by what he has described as a ‘clinique’ register.

3a. Prose, poetry and the ‘pathétique’

Michel Houellebecq has largely distanced himself and his writing from discussions of theoretical approaches to literature. As noted above he has been particularly critical of the *nouveau roman* and the ‘style Minuit’, particularly the novels of Alain Robbe-

Grillet,¹²³ the notion of *écriture*,¹²⁴ as well as the purveyors of canonical ‘French theory’.¹²⁵ Within this context it is perhaps surprising that Houellebecq has claimed a direct line of influence with the work of structuralist poetry theorist Jean Cohen. Indeed, Cohen’s death in 1994 saw Houellebecq publish two glowing reviews of his work on the re-edition of his 1979 text *Le Haut langage*: ‘Le Haut Langage’ for *La Quinzaine Littéraire* and ‘L’Absurdité créatrice’ for *Les Inrockuptibles*.¹²⁶ In the former, not previously considered by Houellebecq’s critics, perhaps because it was not collected in either of the two published volumes of his critical writing, *Interventions* or *Interventions 2*, he notes: ‘aucun ouvrage de théorie littéraire n’avait produit sur moi une impression aussi profonde’.¹²⁷

Houellebecq’s relationship with Jean Cohen’s writing is not restricted to these two book reviews. Cohen’s theory resonates throughout both Houellebecq’s writing about literature and in his creative work. Cohen’s importance is even strikingly symbolised in *Les Particules élémentaires* by a character called ‘Jean Cohen’ who puts an end to the protagonist Bruno’s bullying. It is clearly possible to suggest that, since the writing of *Les Particules élémentaires* was contemporaneous with Houellebecq’s encounter with Cohen’s work, that this reference is a direct homage to the theorist.¹²⁸ Indeed, as Cohen incarnates ‘la loi morale’ at the Meaux *lycée*, his namesake holds a similarly authoritative role in the context of Houellebecq’s writing.¹²⁹

¹²³ Houellebecq, ‘Coupes de sol’, *Interventions 2*, pp. 277-282.

¹²⁴ Houellebecq, ‘Lettre à Lakis Proguidis’, *Interventions 2*, pp. 51-56.

¹²⁵ The posthuman narrator of *Les Particules élémentaires* looks back at ‘le ridicule global dans lequel avaient subitement sombré, après des décennies de surestimation insensée, les travaux de Foucault, de Lacan, de Derrida et de Deleuze ne devait sur le moment laisser le champ libre à aucune pensée philosophique neuve, mais au contraire jeter le discrédit sur l’ensemble des intellectuels se réclamant des “sciences humaines”’, p. 314.

¹²⁶ One, ‘L’Absurdité créatrice’ has been republished in *Interventions* and *Interventions 2*. Houellebecq, ‘Le Haut Langage’, *La Quinzaine littéraire*, 670, 16-31 May 1995, pp. 21-22.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹²⁸ It could also be possible that this reference is what Hussey has described as a sign of the ‘occluded influence’ of Canadian singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen. Hussey has described Cohen as an ‘intellectual guide and model’ for Houellebecq and noted that his album *The Future* (1992) ‘was playing constantly as Houellebecq was writing *Les Particules élémentaires*’. Andrew Hussey, ‘Présence humaine: Michel Houellebecq, poet-chansonnier’, *Le Monde de Houellebecq*, pp. 59-70 (p. 70).

¹²⁹ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 59.

According to Noguez, Houellebecq's first encounter with Cohen's work was in 1995.¹³⁰ A consideration of Cohen's theory and Houellebecq's writing about literature published before that date, however, reveals that a shared sensibility can be observed in the work of both writers, particularly how they celebrate the affective potential of writing. It appears that Houellebecq appreciates Cohen's work for its emphasis on practical, rather than theoretical, emotion. Although Houellebecq apparently did not read Cohen until 1995, this section argues that his early essays already display an understanding of literature that resonates with the theorist's ideas. I suggest that the 'impression [...] profonde' described above by Houellebecq on reading Cohen was one that confirmed his own ideas about the respective qualities of poetry and prose. More precisely, this section considers how Cohen describes the potential of language to emotionally engage the reader before considering how the same capacity is described in Houellebecq's essays. This analysis is in preparation for the following chapters which will consider the practical application of these notions to Houellebecq's creative work.

Cohen's theory of poetic language is chiefly elaborated in *Structure du langage poétique* (1966) and *Le Haut langage* (1979). As the title of the former suggests, Cohen's project is, initially at least, concerned with articulating a 'poétique' in his post-Saussurean study of poetic language. As he asserts: 'La poétique est une science dont la poésie est l'objet'.¹³¹ In this way, which sees Cohen aim towards an objective definition of the specificity of the language of poetry, *Structure du langage poétique* clearly resonates with the ambient structuralism of its mid-1960s publication, particularly that of the revue *Poétique* with which Cohen was associated along with arch-structuralists Gérard Genette, Tzvetan Todorov and Roland Barthes. Cohen is clear to specify how this first book can be viewed in context with a structuralist focus on form which it extends to take full account of the phonic and semantic qualities of poetic language and

¹³⁰ Noguez, *Houellebecq, en fait*, p. 36.

¹³¹ Jean Cohen, *Structure du langage poétique* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009), p. 7.

how these differ from prose: ‘Ce point de vue “formel” que le structuralisme applique à la langue, nous appliquerons quant à nous au langage, c’est-à-dire au message lui-même. A l’intérieur d’une même langue, prose et poésie distingue deux types différents de message’.¹³²

In *Structure du langage poétique*, Cohen makes the distinction between prose, which he describes as ‘le langage courant’,¹³³ primarily concerned with the transmission of facts, typified by the language of science, and poetic language which he argues is deviated from the direct conceptual communication of prose by a series of ‘écarts’.¹³⁴ The object of Cohen’s study in *Structure du langage poétique* is what he terms ‘la poésie intégrale’,¹³⁵ or formal poetry, which deviates from prose by virtue of phonic and semantic differences which violate ‘le code du langage normal’, and can take the form of impertinent, unusual or redundant descriptions or examples of incongruous logic within description.¹³⁶ In his conclusion, Cohen broadens his argument and develops his analysis away from written poetry towards how the notion of the ‘poetic’ can be applied outside literature to describe how an individual subject’s attitude to the world, or his perception of it might be described in terms of ‘poetic’ experience. Extending his notion of the two contrasting languages of prose and poetry, Cohen argues that the same object can be perceived in two different ways as an objective ‘sens prosaïque’ or a more subjective ‘sens poétique’.¹³⁷ Cohen uses the example of the moon that can be described in the former manner as ‘le satellite de la terre’ or in the latter as ‘cette faucille d’or’,¹³⁸ both of which describe the same object and can coexist in human understanding.¹³⁹

In *Le Haut langage*, Cohen considerably broadens the approach of his earlier work and develops his notions of the characteristics of prosaic and poetic language. Crucially,

¹³² Cohen, *Structure du langage poétique*, pp. 28-29.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Within Victor Hugo’s poem ‘Booz endormi’.

¹³⁹ Cohen, *Structure du langage poétique*, p. 193.

Cohen's work considers the capacity of poetic language to provoke an emotional response on the part of the reader.¹⁴⁰ This affective quality, which is not necessarily restricted to formally versified poetry, was suggested in the final chapter of *Structure du langage poétique*, but forms a key part of Cohen's theory as presented in *Le Haut langage* and is a cornerstone of Cohen's definition of poetic language here. Cohen describes prose in terms of its 'conceptuel ou noétique', or intellectual qualities which he contrasts with the 'affectif ou pathétique' potential of poetic language.¹⁴¹ The theorist here underlines that poetic language can be described as 'langage affectif' because of the effect it creates on the reader: 'il faut entendre par une telle expression un langage dont l'affect n'est pas la cause ou l'effet du signifié mais *est ce signifié*' and clarifies that, 'on ne peut donc [...] définir un type de langage comme langage affectif que si la signification portée par ce langage est un éprouvé'.¹⁴² To refer to this specific emotional content of 'pathétique' language, Cohen introduces the term 'pathème'.¹⁴³

3b. Houellebecq on Cohen

In his two articles on Cohen, Houellebecq expresses his admiration for the theorist's work. Houellebecq highlights Cohen's conception of poetry as more than exclusively an aesthetic or a formal product, and stresses its capacity to create an emotional response: 'à travers les mots, c'est la réalité qu'ils désignent qui retrouve son pouvoir d'horreur ou d'enchantement, son pathos premier'.¹⁴⁴ Importantly, Houellebecq notes how the 'pathétique' is a quality that can be located in forms of writing other than poetry. Houellebecq notes that 'la signification pathétique' arises when writing goes further

¹⁴⁰ Cohen is careful to clarify, however, that this emotional response is a different order to that of direct, lived experience, stressing that, 'On dira d'un tel éprouvé qu'il est intermédiaire entre l'être et le connaître, ni en coïncidence avec le sujet comme vécu, ni en totale extériorité, comme le connu, mais à mi-distance et comme au contact des espaces phénoménologies du moi et du non-moi'. Cohen, *Le Haut Langage* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), p. 157.

¹⁴¹ Cohen, *Le Haut Langage*, p. 158.

¹⁴² Ibid., pp. 147-148 [italics in original text].

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 158.

¹⁴⁴ Houellebecq, 'L'Absurdité créatrice', *Interventions 2*, pp. 73-81 (p. 77). *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* is an influential theoretical text by theorist Julia Kristeva. Given Houellebecq's general dislike of literary theory, I am inclined to dismiss the intentionality of this intertextual relationship.

than the transmission of fact to touch ‘l’âme de celui qui écouté’.¹⁴⁵ In a consideration of a line of Baudelaire’s poetry, for example, Houellebecq asserts: ‘La poésie se produit; la signification pathétique envahit le monde’,¹⁴⁶ implying that ‘poésie’ is any writing that asserts such ‘signification pathétique’. In such a way, ‘pathétique’ and ‘poésie’ are used synonymously within Houellebecq’s critical vocabulary. Both, in Houellebecq’s reading of Cohen, can be appreciated in fields other than formal poetry. Houellebecq describes a mode of poetic perception or a way of seeing the world and thus asserts that ‘la poésie n’est pas seulement un autre langage; c’est un autre regard. Une manière de voir le monde, tous les objets du monde (les autoroutes comme les serpents, les fleurs comme les parkings)’.¹⁴⁷ As my analysis will demonstrate, Houellebecq consistently exploits the pathetic potential of the less traditionally poetic such as ‘les parkings’ and ‘les autoroutes’, rather than only ‘les serpents and ‘les fleurs’ in an assertion of his own ‘manière de voir le monde’ in his poetry as in his prose.

As noted above, Houellebecq has a broad conception of the domain of ‘poésie’. In this way, his conception of poetic language can be clarified with reference to the work of Roman Jakobson, whose 1960 essay, ‘Linguistics and Poetics’, also provides an important context for Houellebecq’s reading of Cohen’s work. Jakobson describes language in terms of a series of functions – such as the ‘phatic’, ‘referential’ and ‘metalingual’ functions – which operate in conjunction with each other, rather than independently, in different instances of communication. Jakobson describes the ‘poetic function’ of language which, he argues, can be observed to some extent throughout all communicative acts rather than exclusively poetry. He highlights that ‘[the] poetic function is not the sole function of verbal art but only its dominant, determining function,

¹⁴⁵ Houellebecq, ‘L’Absurdité créatrice’, p. 76.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 78.

whereas in all other verbal activities it acts as a subsidiary, accessory constituent'.¹⁴⁸ As noted above, Houellebecq's reading of Cohen equally celebrates the emotive, or pathétique, potential of poetic language, which is also an important component of Jakobson's analysis: 'The emotive function [...], flavors to some extent all our utterances, on their phonic, grammatical, and lexical level'.¹⁴⁹ For Jakobson, this is felt most acutely in lyric poetry, but it is by no means restricted to this form of writing. While the work of both Cohen and Jakobson considers the 'emotive' and 'poetic' functions of language, Cohen's work differs, particularly in *Le Haut langage*, in the extent to which he repeatedly stresses the close links between the two, an appreciation of which, I argue throughout this thesis, can be seen to resonate particularly with Houellebecq's theory and practice.

In addition to its emotional capacity, Houellebecq's reading of Cohen, as noted above, also stresses the importance, and particularly, the prevalence of Jakobson's 'poetic function' of language, as observable 'in all other verbal activities'. For Houellebecq, for example, the description of writing as 'poetic', can also be extended to writing in prose. This is a description that Houellebecq has consistently applied to prose, particularly genre fiction, a quality, as I will consider presently, also noted by Cohen in *Le Haut langage*. Houellebecq has, for example, also noted the 'poésie' of American fantasy writer H.P. Lovecraft.¹⁵⁰ Houellebecq has equally described science fiction as 'une littérature poétique',¹⁵¹ while detective fiction, which will be considered in detail in Chapter Four, can equally also be 'très poétiques' in terms of the mood of suspense they create.¹⁵² Poetry here, as I shall demonstrate, arises

¹⁴⁸ Roman Jakobson, 'Linguistics and Poetics' in *Style in Language*, ed. by Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), pp. 350-377 (356). Jakobson also asserts that 'Any attempt to reduce the sphere of the poetic function to poetry or to confine poetry to the poetic function would be a delusive oversimplification'. Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 354.

¹⁵⁰ See pp. 57-60 below.

¹⁵¹ Houellebecq, 'Sortir du XX^e siècle' in *Interventions 2*, pp. 221-226 (p. 224).

¹⁵² Josyane Savigneau, 'Michel Houellebecq: "Tout ce que la science permet sera réalisé"', *Le Monde*, 20 August 2005 (para. 30 of 35).

due to the overall effect on the reader as reading fiction becomes a fully immersive experience rather than aesthetic or formal experimentation. In this way, the novel has the potential to be what Houellebecq describes as ‘un pole de résistance vivace’ or ‘un instrument de déconnection redoutable’ that allows the reader,¹⁵³ through the experience of reading, to take a metaphorical ‘pas de côté’ away from the ‘flux informatif-publicitaire’ of contemporary experience.¹⁵⁴

3c. Critics on Houellebecq and Cohen

Jacob Carlson and Christophe Ippolito have considered the relationship between the work of Cohen and Houellebecq. Carlson’s analysis argues that types of language observed by Cohen in literature: ‘prosaïque’, ‘poétique’ and ‘comique’, can be equated with the genres of literary realism, Romantic poetry and satire respectively within Houellebecq’s work.¹⁵⁵ Cohen’s notion of the ‘comique’ was not discussed by Houellebecq in his writing on Cohen (it did not feature in either of the two books Houellebecq reviewed) and thus will not form part of my analysis.¹⁵⁶ The present study will focus on language to a greater extent than genre and take Cohen’s remarks on the novel into explicit consideration.¹⁵⁷

Ippolito notes the parallels between Cohen’s theory of poetic language and that elaborated by Houellebecq in his critical writing and practically demonstrated in his published poetry.¹⁵⁸ Ippolito shows that Houellebecq shares an appreciation of the main characteristics of poetic language as defined by Cohen in *Le Haut langage*. Firstly, the way it acts as a ‘déviation’ of prose as considered above. Secondly, for Ippolito, both writers appreciate that poetic language, because of this ‘déviation’, is a language that

¹⁵³ Houellebecq, ‘Approches du désarroi’, p. 34.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 44. Notably, this ‘sidestep’ is itself described as ‘poetic’ since it helps to bring about ‘La poésie du mouvement arrêté’, Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁵⁵ Jacob Carlson, ‘La Poétique de Houellebecq: réalisme, satire, mythe’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Gothenburg, 2011).

¹⁵⁶ Cohen considered the ‘comique’ within writing in Jean Cohen, ‘Comique et poétique’, *Poétique*, 61 (1985), pp. 49-61.

¹⁵⁷ Cohen’s remarks on genre will be considered with reference to the *roman policier* in Chapter Four.

¹⁵⁸ Christophe Ippolito, ‘Le Chant du signifié: sur une lecture de Jean Cohen par Michel Houellebecq’, *L’Esprit Créateur*, 49:2 (2009), pp. 105-118.

cannot be contradicted. Unlike conceptual language where meaning is generated through a word having a network of differential or paradigmatic relationships with other words, including its opposite, meaning it can be contradicted or negated, poetic language is marked by an ‘impossibility’ that means its opposite meaning cannot be articulated. For Cohen: ‘le langage poétique détruit la structure oppositive dans laquelle opère le sémantisme de la langue’.¹⁵⁹ As Houellebecq notes: ‘le langage ordinaire, informative, est un langage qui peut être nié. Par un complexe système d’écarts, le poète nie la possibilité de cette négation jusqu’à établir un langage absolu, total, dénué de contraire comme d’opposition’.¹⁶⁰ This quality of poetic language leads to its potential for ‘totalisation’, the creation of a distinctly ambiguous poetic space or atmosphere. Finally, both writers, for Ippolito, share an appreciation of the ‘pathétique’, the emotional potential of poetic language as elaborated above.

Ippolito concludes that despite these parallels, Houellebecq’s approach to poetic language is ‘à contre-courant’ to that of Cohen.¹⁶¹ He argues that the chief divergence between the two writers concerns the position of the ‘pathétique’. As Ippolito observes, this quality emerges within Cohen’s work as a product of the other three qualities of poetic language. Ippolito, however, stresses that ‘la pathéticité’ for Houellebecq is at the opposite end of ‘la chaîne causale’ to Cohen and considers emotion as the starting point of his writing rather than a potential product of it: ‘Alors que Cohen voit la pathéticité comme un produit, un résultat, comme un précipité de la totalité, pour Houellebecq, il s’agit d’articuler la pathéticité dans une structure’.¹⁶²

For Ippolito, it is thus emotion in the form of ‘la souffrance’ that is the starting point for Houellebecq’s poetics, noting how in his essay ‘Rester vivant’ he stresses that suffering is a source of poetic inspiration. For Houellebecq here, the poet is driven to

¹⁵⁹ Cohen, *Le Haut langage*, p. 129.

¹⁶⁰ Houellebecq, ‘Le Haut Langage’, in *La Quinzaine littéraire*, 670, 16-31 May 1995, pp. 21-22.

¹⁶¹ Ippolito, ‘Le Chant du signifié’, p. 110.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

write because of the suffering inherent in the human condition: ‘La première démarche poétique consiste à remonter à l’origine. À savoir: à la souffrance’.¹⁶³ For Ippolito, Houellebecq’s declaration that ‘Apprendre à devenir poète, c’est désapprendre à vivre’ is an invocation to the aspiring poet to embrace existential suffering to find poetic inspiration, and thus further his poetic ambition.¹⁶⁴ This leads Ippolito to stress the critical dimension of Houellebecq’s writing: ‘l’importance qu’il accorde à la fonction critique de la poésie plutôt qu’à la célébration du monde, à la résistance plutôt qu’à la passivité’.¹⁶⁵ Ippolito notes the role of emotion in Houellebecq’s work as ‘l’émotion dans son apparaitre’, emotion put to use rather than the emotion that the work can produce within a reader.¹⁶⁶ The experience of suffering is clearly crucial for Houellebecq’s poetry and prose, but is not exclusively a means to an end since it is not completely transformed into societal critique. Restricting the author’s encounter with ‘souffrance’ to inspiration for criticism risks the critic overlooking the extent to which Houellebecq’s texts have their own ‘pathéticité’, generate their own ‘signification pathétique’ and can thus be read in terms of their emotional dimension. Furthermore, as I shall demonstrate, Houellebecq suggests in ‘Rester vivant’ that ‘souffrance’ is a quality that can, and indeed should, be shared with the reader. The following chapter will demonstrate that this is a recurrent preoccupation for Houellebecq’s poetry and his prose, in particular in terms of how it viscerally evokes the human body as a site of physical suffering and decay. In such a way, if the suffering in his work is to be read in terms of the implicit criticism it suggests, this is based on how Houellebecq attempts to bring about the affective identification of this suffering within his readers and, in doing so, championing the capacity of literature to bring this about.

¹⁶³ Houellebecq, ‘Rester vivant’, in *Rester vivant et autres textes* (Paris: Librio, 2008), pp. 9-27 (p. 9).

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁶⁵ Ippolito, ‘Le Chant du signifié’, p. 116.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 114

Cohen's work on the 'poetic' is not, however, without its critical challenges. Indeed, these have been noted by Houellebecq who argues that while *Structure du langage poétique* 'satisfait aux critères de sérieux de l'Université',¹⁶⁷ and can be viewed within the context of the structuralist project as noted above, his subsequent work is more problematic since *Le Haut langage* 'va s'écarter de l'ensemble des théories existantes'.¹⁶⁸ Indeed, a critical study of writing that strives to take the emotional engagement of the reader into consideration risks being undermined by the problematic assumption it appears to make that every reader of a text will respond in the same predictable manner. I have found Jenefer Robinson's work on the emotional reception of art to be of particular help in developing a theoretical framework for this thesis since it is based on rigorous scientific and psychological observation and analysis of the impact of literature on the reader and proposes an approach that successfully allows for a multiplicity of reader positions in relation to a text. As well as a robust understanding of philosophical research into the theory of emotion, Robinson's *Deeper Than Reason* also presents a clear, convincing and practical consideration of how a reader can experience realist literature from the perspective of emotion. In her study, Robinson makes a detailed consideration of the role played by content, but also particularly by textual form and the figure of the implied author, all of which, as I will demonstrate, are of acute pertinence to a study of Houellebecq's writing.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Houellebecq, 'L'Absurdité créatrice', p. 73.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 74.

¹⁶⁹ I would also posit that the spirit of Robinson's approach, which draws together fiction, science and philosophy, is appropriate within the context of Houellebecq's writing given the fusion of the discourses of all these forms of writing in his own work. A full, technical discussion of emotional affect also requires some consideration of the recent post Deleuze and Guattari 'affective turn' within contemporary critical theory which has inspired the work of theorists including Brian Massumi and Silvan Tomkins which continues to explore the experience of affect from the perspective of an abstract and biological 'non-conscious experience of intensity' and with reference to political, economic and cultural spheres (Eric Shouse, 'Feeling, Emotion, Affect' *M/C Journal*, 8.6 (2005), <<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0512/03-shouse.php>> [accessed October 20, 2015]). This is an important area of research and, can clearly be regarded as of interest for Houellebecq's work in terms of its broader implications, particularly the broader social implications of affect. As I have noted above, however, this thesis strives to focus critical attention on the textual experience of reading Houellebecq's fiction in terms of literary style. For this reason, a deeper consideration of affect in this way will not be provided here.

Robinson's work asserts the importance of an individual reader's emotional response to a literary text in his or her critical appreciation since it adds a crucial level of meaning to their judgement. Robinson suggests, in an argument that resonates with Cohen's, that the cognitive process at work when we respond to art, including literature: 'work just the same way [...] as they do when we respond to people and events in real life'.¹⁷⁰ For Robinson, the emotional process is based around the 'affective appraisal' of stimuli – events in real life or those described within fiction. These events can produce subjective physiological responses, including feelings, which are then subject to 'cognitive monitoring' which cause the individual to monitor and adapt his or her behaviour accordingly. In the case of a literary text, this process leads a reader to form opinions about what he or she has just read.¹⁷¹ Within writing, Robinson stresses that a degree of identification with the character or events described is necessary for the reader to feel emotionally engaged: 'it is clear that I won't experience any emotional response to a novel unless I sense that my own interests, goals and wants are somehow at stake'.¹⁷² For this reason, Robinson's analysis primarily considers work that falls within the tradition of Western realism. While Robinson does not consider Houellebecq's writing, critics including Rabosseau have demonstrated how Houellebecq's work should be situated within such a tradition, thus underlining the pertinency of her approach for his work.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper Than Reason* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), p. 105. Robinson pre-empts criticism of her approach that cites what she describes as 'the paradox of fiction', the issue of whether a reader can feel real emotional involvement with a fictional tale, by arguing that 'knowing we are emotionally engaged with imaginary or fictional characters and events does not alter our non-cognitive affective appraisals', p. 143.

¹⁷¹ 'When human beings have an emotional response to something in the (internal or external) environment, they make an *affective appraisal* that picks that thing out as *significant to me* (given my wants, goals and interests) and requiring *attention*. This affective appraisal causes *physiological changes, action tendencies*, and expressive gestures, including characteristic *facial and vocal expressions*, that may be subjectively experienced as *feelings*, and the whole process is then modified by *cognitive monitoring*. The various aspects of the emotion process are interconnected in various ways. For example, physiological responses reinforce attention [...] In short the process is constantly modulating in response to feedback from the various elements in the process'. *Ibid.*, pp. 113-114 [italics in original text].

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 114.

¹⁷³ Sandrine Rabosseau, 'Michel Houellebecq, un romancier "néo-naturaliste"', in *Le Monde de Houellebecq*, pp. 105-113.

As noted above, Robinson's work also pre-empts possible criticism of her approach for making normative assumptions about readers and the reading experience she describes since her study proposes an approach to literature that legitimises a wide variety of emotional responses to a text, under the auspices of the implied author. Robinson thus argues that a text will encourage a reader to take a position in relation to it, and that responses which differ from those intended authorially due to that reader's biographical or cultural background would therefore result from their partial or incomplete reading of a text. Robinson argues that:

A reader's interaction with a text is guided by the author but the author cannot 'intend' every response of the reader. If readers are emotionally involved in a novel, then their emotional responses will be changing all the time, and these responses will vary from one reader to another, depending not just on how much background they have in the novelist and her times, but also on the particularities of their own interests, wants and values. The author tries to guide us through the text, but she can lead us only so far.¹⁷⁴

Rather than making normative assumptions about an 'ideal' reader, Robinson's work thus admits that readers will be most 'fully open to the novel',¹⁷⁵ and will be more successfully drawn into a text if they can relate to the shared 'interests, goals and wants', noted above, hence her consideration of the realist tradition.¹⁷⁶ A reader able to find such common ground is thus most receptive to the emotional and rhetorical strategies of the author. These strategies that are used to bring about such a guided relationship will be considered in the following two chapters. The figure of the author which, I argue, is complicated and results in a reader's problematic emotional relationship with Houellebecq's texts will be considered in Chapter Three, below.

Robinson therefore advocates a critical approach to literature that takes account of the individual reader's emotional responses to a text. This has been informed by Wolfgang Iser's 'reader response' theory which she broadens to consider emotion and

¹⁷⁴ Robinson, *Deeper Than Reason*, p. 194.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ This study does not, accordingly, consider the reception of Houellebecq's work within the context of traditions which fall outside Western realism.

suggests that the process of reading sees the reader ‘fill in [emotional] gaps in texts’. Robinson argues ‘that emotional responses can and do fill in gaps in texts, that they give us information about the characters and events described, and furthermore, that the different ways in which different readers assess characters and events is partly a *function* of the different emotional responses of those readers to the characters’.¹⁷⁷ For Robinson, although a reader of the realist texts she considers does, of course, have the emotional freedom to respond to the ‘affective appraisal’ a text provokes in myriad ways, she argues that this process is guided and managed by ‘form and formal devices’ which control ‘our emotional responses to literature’ as well as the figure of the ‘implied author’ noted above against whom the reader gauges the appropriateness of their emotional responses.¹⁷⁸ These rhetorical strategies in Houellebecq will be considered in the following two chapters of this thesis.

4. Houellebecq on literature

As noted above, Houellebecq’s encounter with Cohen’s work did not take place until 1995. It is possible, however, to observe conclusions about the emotional potential of poetic language similar to those he will discover in Cohen’s work in Houellebecq’s critical writing published before this date. Most significantly, these resonate with the distinction Cohen makes between the conceptual language of prose and the affective or ‘pathétique’ qualities of poetic language. As I shall consider in this section, these two forms of literary language are also equated in Houellebecq’s essays with modes of experience which are not necessarily restricted to writing. This section considers three essays, all of which were first published in 1991: ‘Renoncer à l’intelligence’, *H.P. Lovecraft. Contre le monde, contre la vie* and ‘Rester vivant’. The first two of these are

¹⁷⁷ Robinson, *Deeper Than Reason*, p. 122 [italics in original text].

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 196 & 179.

secondary studies of the work of other writers, but they are arguably most interesting for the insight they bring to Houellebecq's own work.¹⁷⁹

4a. *L'Odeur des jacinthes*

Houellebecq's 'Renoncer à l'intelligence' proves useful since it provides a greater understanding of the qualities he attributes to prose and poetry, which are both equally 'manière[s] de voir le monde'. The essay is the introduction to *L'Odeur des jacinthes*, a collection of Remy de Gourmont's poetry, and one of the earliest pieces of Houellebecq's published work, but has not been re-issued in either of the two published collections of his essays and consequently has not been extensively critically discussed. This essay is an important text in terms of the insight it provides to Houellebecq's own writing since he uses his forebear as a point of reference against which he articulates his own poetics.

Gourmont is most critically recognised for his essays,¹⁸⁰ and has been described by Patrick McGuinness as 'perhaps the greatest critic of his time'.¹⁸¹ In this article, however, Houellebecq argues for the value of his love poetry. Houellebecq proposes that, while its 'effusions sentimentales' sit uncomfortably within Gourmont's broader *œuvre* of reasoned, critical writing, his sensual and sentimental poems such as 'Les cheveux', 'Elle a un corps' and 'Les Jacynthes' contrast yet complement his canonical body of work since they also contribute to knowledge about human experience.¹⁸² 'Il reste une lacune dans la compréhension, que seule la poésie peut venir remplir', Houellebecq suggests, and posits 'compréhension', reasoned argument as demonstrated in Gourmont's essays, against 'poésie', which offers the emotional and sensual insight

¹⁷⁹ This is reinforced by Bowd who notes that 'Houellebecq's essays on literature and society offer insights into the guiding principles of his fictional work'. Gavin Bowd, 'Michel Houellebecq and the Pursuit of Happiness', *Nottingham French Studies*, 41:1 (2002), pp. 28-39 (p. 29).

¹⁸⁰ Most notoriously 1891's 'Le Joujou Patriotisme' which created a contemporary literary scandal.

¹⁸¹ Patrick McGuinness, 'Symbolism' in *The Cambridge History of French Literature*, pp. 479-487 (p. 480).

¹⁸² Houellebecq, 'Renoncer à l'intelligence' in Remy de Gourmont, *L'Odeur des jacinthes* ed. by Michel Houellebecq (Paris: La Différence, 1991), pp. 7-20 (p. 7).

than reasoned thought cannot bring about.¹⁸³ The opposition between ‘compréhension’ and ‘poésie’ is entirely congruent with the distinctions Cohen has made between the ‘noétique’ and ‘pathétique’ in his work as discussed above, the former concerned with concepts, the latter with affect.

For Houellebecq, Gourmont’s essays are concerned with the manipulation of ideas in the form of finely-crafted arguments hence they are unable to comprehensively reflect the human condition. The ‘intelligence’ of the essay’s title, or the cerebral representation of phenomena, is always inferior to the immediacy of lived emotional experience, which for Houellebecq is always closer to ‘la poésie’, here described as a ‘retour en force de la partie sombre et vivante de l’homme, au détriment de son intellect’.¹⁸⁴ He stresses that poetry is more suited to evoking emotion since: ‘La poésie, elle, ne ment jamais, car elle est au plus près de l’instant, elle est intuition pure de l’instant’.¹⁸⁵ In the case of Gourmont’s poems it is love that cannot be completely reduced to prosaic representation. He writes: ‘[la poésie] seule [...] peut rendre compte de ce phénomène surprenant: l’amour offre une voie de passage direct entre chair et âme, court-circuitant l’intelligence et le monde des représentations’.¹⁸⁶ For Houellebecq, these poems evoke physical and emotional sensation in a way the prose essay cannot. ‘Le Cheveux’, for example, is preoccupied with the scent of the poet’s beloved (‘Tu sens le bois, tu sens le pain / Qu’on apporte le matin’).¹⁸⁷ The series of ‘sonnets en prose’, ‘Elle a un corps...’,¹⁸⁸ sees Gourmont abandon the intellectual for

¹⁸³ Houellebecq, ‘Renoncer à l’intelligence’, p. 8.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 15. The phrase ‘intuition pure de l’instant’ evokes Kant’s consideration of pure intuition in his *Critique of Pure Reason* where he describes it in opposition to empirical intuition in his description of the operation of subjective sensibility. For Kant, empirical intuitions are related to physical or tangible experiences ‘which relate to an object by means of sensation’. Pure intuition, in Kant’s definition, is a form of sensibility where such sensation is absent and ‘exists a priori in the mind’, ‘without any real object of the senses or any sensation’. Houellebecq’s use of the term, however, appears to draw closer to the emotional as he describes the ‘émotion amoureuse’ (p. 8) of Gourmont’s poetry. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1952), p. 23.

¹⁸⁶ Houellebecq, ‘Renoncer à l’intelligence’, p. 8.

¹⁸⁷ ‘Les Cheveux’ in *L’Odeur des jacinthes*, pp. 77-78 (77).

¹⁸⁸ ‘Elle a un corps...’ in Ibid., pp. 111-122.

the emotions associated with physical love, for ‘une vraie joie, celle de la pureté charnelle retrouvée’.¹⁸⁹ In this way, Houellebecq appears to value the immediacy of poetry more highly than prose to reflect the sensual and sentimental aspects of human experience as highlighted by Gourmont’s ‘effusions sentimentales’.¹⁹⁰ He concludes ‘La poésie garde toujours une longueur d’avance. L’intelligence ne vient qu’en second lieu, et elle reste au second plan’.¹⁹¹

4b. *Contre le monde, contre la vie*: Lovecraft’s ‘pathétique’

Houellebecq’s essay on H.P. Lovecraft, also first published by La Différence in 1991, is a pertinent point of comparison with the Gourmont essay since it deepens our understanding of Houellebecq’s conception of the emotional power of writing. Notably, he stresses here that the ‘pathétique’ poetic quality can be exploited through prose, just as it can through poetry. Whereas the essay considered above saw Houellebecq highlight how Gourmont evoked the ‘pathétique’ within his poetry, the Lovecraft essay sees him stress the ‘poétique’ qualities of the fantasy writer’s prose stories which create a comparable effect.

Houellebecq notes that, like himself, Lovecraft initially wrote poems: ‘D’abord que Lovecraft était un poète; il fait partie de ces écrivains qui *ont commencé par la poésie*’.¹⁹² The overall suggestion, implied here by italicisation, is that whilst his stories were written in prose, the complex and fantastical descriptions they contain – and the effect they create – are evidence that poetry remains at the heart of his writing. More precisely, although the phrase is not explicitly used in the essay, Houellebecq celebrates the ‘signification pathétique’ of the American’s writing. Notably, Houellebecq has highlighted Lovecraft’s ability to draw an emotional response from the reader as his major literary achievement: ‘Les écrits de HPL visent à un seul but: amener le lecteur à

¹⁸⁹ Houellebecq, ‘Renoncer à l’intelligence’, p. 13.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁹² Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft*, p. 139 [italics in original text].

un état de fascination. Les seuls sentiments humains dont il veut entendre parler sont l'émerveillement et la peur. Il bâtera son univers sur eux, et exclusivement sur eux'.¹⁹³

More precisely, the 'poetry' in Houellebecq's reading of Lovecraft is that which establishes a visceral reading response that challenges the primacy of the intellectual: 'Lovecraft veut créer un fantastique capable de terrifier toute créature douée de raison'.¹⁹⁴

Houellebecq's essay also considers the techniques by which a 'pathétique' effect is created and evoke such 'émerveillement' and 'peur'. In a consideration of how his forebear deploys scientific terminology within his fiction, for example, Houellebecq argues that despite the intensely prosaic nature of the language, it can create a poetic impact: 'l'utilisation du vocabulaire scientifique peut constituer un extraordinaire stimulant pour l'imagination poétique'.¹⁹⁵ In particular, intensely detailed prosaic language, 'celui des encyclopédies', can produce 'un effet délirant et extatique', which he describes as the 'précision onirique' of Lovecraft's writing.¹⁹⁶

Houellebecq makes an important clarification regarding the emotional impact of Lovecraft's work that he does not note in Gourmont. In addition to the 'effet délirant et extatique', the 'pathétique' effect of Lovecraft's prose can also lead the reader towards what he describes as a state of philosophical contemplation. The complex, precise and fantastical descriptions have the capacity to bring about an 'état de transe poétique qui accompagne la révélation des vérités interdites' for the reader.¹⁹⁷ Houellebecq does not, unfortunately, give an insight into the specificity of the 'vérités interdites' to which Lovecraft's writing is supposed to give access. The final lines of the essay may, however, provide an indication since they suggest how his writing offers a form of

¹⁹³ Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft*, p. 58.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 88. This is reinforced by Houellebecq's assertion in a preface to the essay, published in 1998 that highlights a similar capacity within another example of Lovecraft's prose: 'Nous sommes là à un moment où l'extrême acuité de la perception sensorielle est tout près de provoquer un basculement dans la perception philosophique du monde; autrement dit, nous sommes là dans la poésie'. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

imaginative or emotional escapism that promotes contemplation or the metaphorical ‘pas de côté’ as noted above:

Offrir une alternative à la vie sous toutes ses formes, constituer une opposition permanente, un recours permanent à la vie: telle est la plus haute mission du poète sur cette terre. Howard Phillips Lovecraft a rempli cette mission’.¹⁹⁸

As well as asserting the ‘poetic’ description of Lovecraft’s prose, the extract also highlights his hostile position to humanity, one reinforced by the subtitle of Houellebecq’s essay: ‘contre le monde, contre la vie’. In creating his richly detailed poetic works, Lovecraft has created an ‘opposition permanente’ to the world. Such opposition is reinforced by the military vocabulary Houellebecq has used to describe Lovecraft’s ‘techniques d’assaut’.¹⁹⁹ As well as providing an alternative, it is also an immersive universe into which a reader can temporarily escape, providing ‘un recours permanent à la vie’. In such a way, Lovecraft is hostile to the world, but concurrently providing recourse to it as a degree of emotional escape or appeasement to his readers who, Houellebecq notes, frequently ‘en ont *un peu marre*’.²⁰⁰

Houellebecq’s essay on Lovecraft is less valuable as an original analysis of Lovecraft’s life and work than it is as an expression of Houellebecq’s broader aesthetic position.²⁰¹ Demonpion has suggested how Michel Bulteau, editor of the ‘Infréquentables’ series at the Rocher publishing house which issued the text, was ‘embarrassé à plus d’un titre’ by the extent of the personal identification that Houellebecq made with Lovecraft and asked him to revise his manuscript accordingly.²⁰² Significantly, Jean-François Patricola’s analysis of the essay questions the extent to which Houellebecq’s essay can be read within the context of Lovecraft

¹⁹⁸ Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft*, p. 150.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14 [italics in original text]. As Houellebecq observes: ‘Quand on aime la vie, on ne lit pas’.
Ibid.

²⁰¹ This is reinforced by Theo Tait who also describes the text as ‘a strange, messianic celebration of the seminal fantasy and horror writer – more revealing of Houellebecq’s own Schopenhauer-derived pessimism and intentions as a writer than of Lovecraft’. Theo Tait, ‘Gorilla with Mobile Phone’, *London Review of Books*, 28:3, 9 February 2006.

²⁰² Demonpion, *Houellebecq non autorisé*, p. 141.

scholarship and, in particular, doubts the originality of Houellebecq's analysis. Patricola describes the essay rather as a paraphrasing, 'plagiat à peine déguisé' or a 'refonte du volume des *Cahiers de L'Herne* consacrés à Lovecraft' and proceeds to demonstrate how his essay frequently reformulates and neglects to attribute ideas presented in the collection.²⁰³ Patricola also pertinently notes that such an approach also risks making Houellebecq's essay somewhat out-dated since the *Herne* volume his work appears to draw from was published in 1969 and has since been surpassed by other studies.²⁰⁴ Dorna Khazeni, who translated Houellebecq's essay on Lovecraft into English has additionally noted that she, with the help of two leading Lovecraftian scholars, was unable to find the original sources of many of the citations Houellebecq claims to make from Lovecraft's work, which must also call the contribution of Houellebecq's scholarship into question.²⁰⁵

4c. 'Rester vivant' and 'la partie sombre'

Houellebecq's early essay 'Rester vivant' discussed briefly above allows us to further clarify the definitions of 'prose' and 'poetry' within the author's poetics. The essay is also a valuable example of how Houellebecq articulates his poetic vision on his own terms rather than defining his work against another writer. It additionally articulates the precise spectrum of emotionality that we will observe in his writing in the following chapters.

²⁰³ Jean-François Patricola, *Michel Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente* (Montréal: Écriture, 2005), pp. 117-118.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 123.

²⁰⁵ Dorna Khazeni, 'Translator's notes', in Michel Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the world, against life*, trans. by Dorna Khazeni (San Francisco: Believer Books, 2005), p. 241. Patricola's argument that Houellebecq has reformulated the *Herne* volume as the basis of his essay also draws attention to an important aspect of his style, what he describes as the 'tout le secret de son art': 'celui de la récupération, du fourretout, du creuset superficiel des théories et des resucées en nombre, pour ne pas dire plagiat à peine déguisé', Patricola, *Michel Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente*, p. 117. Patricola's approach does not consider the 'poésie' Houellebecq observes in Lovecraft, or that of Houellebecq's writing and his assessment of Houellebecq's style ranks him alongside those who have dismissed it as 'plat' as noted above: 'sa langue est apathique, flegmatique et dépitée, banale, proche du slogan publicitaire ou de la harangue, voire de l'insulte, commune et partagée par tous. Elle circule sans difficulté, passe de bouche en bouche, se trouve évoquée sur toutes les ondes et étalée dans tous les articles de presse, s'invite à la machine à café ou dans le métro; bref, elle est populaire!'. Patricola, *Michel Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente*, p. 220.

‘Rester vivant’ is presented as a manifesto, or ‘méthode’ for aspiring poets on how to approach writing and how they can cultivate an attitude appropriate to producing poetry.²⁰⁶ In many ways, the text appears to present a view of literature that largely resembles that presented in the essay on Gourmont since it stresses poetry’s capacity to evoke a raw emotionality in opposition to the abstractions of rational thought. This notion is here concisely introduced in terms congruent with the Gourmont essay: ‘La poésie, en réalité, précède de peu le langage articulé’.²⁰⁷ In addition: ‘L’émotion abolit la chaîne causale; elle est seule capable de faire percevoir les choses en soi; la transmission de cette perception et l’objet de la poésie’.²⁰⁸ As with the Gourmont essay, Houellebecq consistently stresses the dichotomy of the intellectual and the emotional: ‘Ne recherchez pas la connaissance pour elle-même. Tout ce qui ne procède pas de l’émotion est, en poésie, de valeur nulle’.²⁰⁹ Houellebecq here stresses the inability of conceptual thought to reflect real emotional experience: ‘la poésie doit découvrir la réalité par ses propres voies, purement intuitives, sans passer par le filtre d’une reconstruction intellectuelle du monde’.²¹⁰ In addition, this sentiment appears to be echoed, albeit through the prism of fiction, in Houellebecq’s novel *Extension du domaine de la lutte* when the narrator bemoans the capacity of prose, specifically the realist novel, to fully reflect experience which, in the light of ‘Rester vivant’ and ‘Renoncer à l’intelligence’, poetry seems to possess: ‘Les pages qui vont suivre constituent un roman [...]. L’écriture ne soulage guère. Elle retrace, elle délimite. Elle introduit un soupçon de cohérence, l’idée d’un réalisme’.²¹¹ Again, it is exactly these different aspects of poetic language and prose: the former’s capacity to reflect emotion

²⁰⁶ While Houellebecq here explicitly considers formal poetry, his conclusions are also valid for our reading of his prose.

²⁰⁷ Houellebecq, ‘Rester vivant’, p. 15.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 25.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 14.

and the latter's to introduce a degree of intellectual coherence that Houellebecq exploits in his fiction.

There are such similarities between 'Rester vivant' and the Gourmont piece, but the vision of the world presented here is, however, somewhat darker. While Houellebecq sees Gourmont's work as a celebration of amorous sensuality, in Houellebecq's own conception in 'Rester vivant', the world is dominated by 'la souffrance'. The potential for love exists but its attainability is questioned: 'l'amour ne peut plus guère se manifester; mais l'idéal de l'amour n'a pas diminué'.²¹² For Houellebecq, the inevitable disappointment for those hoping to attain love leads to suffering. In this way, 'la souffrance', rather than love becomes the prime emotional motivation for his work: 'Votre existence n'est plus qu'un tissu de souffrances. Vous pensez parvenir à les déployer dans une forme cohérente', with the ultimate aim of avoiding suicide and, of course, 'Rester vivant'.²¹³

Houellebecq describes the situation of the poet using precisely the same form of words he uses in his essay on Gourmont. Here, Houellebecq addresses poets and asserts: 'Vous êtes du côté du malheur; vous êtes la partie sombre', which echoes a reference in the Gourmont essay to 'la partie sombre et vivante de l'homme' where deep emotion resides,²¹⁴ again here suggesting that poetry is of a different nature to intellectual thought but implying that the poet who is able to embrace his suffering has an alternative insight to he who does not. In this way Houellebecq elaborates the spectrum of the poetically 'pathétique' that is as sensual as Gourmont's, but which is considerably darker than the examples provided by his predecessor's poetry suggest. As I have suggested above in contrast to Ippolito's conclusions, 'la souffrance' is not only inspiration and is a poetic effect that can be shared with the reader. Indeed, this appears to be the poet's true vocation. As Houellebecq advises the aspiring poet in 'Rester

²¹² Houellebecq, 'Rester vivant', p. 10.

²¹³ Ibid., p. 16.

²¹⁴ Houellebecq, 'Renoncer à l'intelligence', p. 9.

vivant’: ‘Toute société a ses points de moindre résistance, ses plaies. Mettez le doigt sur la plaie, et appuyez bien fort’, and ‘Passez à l’attaque!’.²¹⁵ Indeed, such incitement to hostility seems itself drawn from the example provided by Lovecraft, himself a writer who has used his own writing to ‘passe à l’attaque’. Houellebecq’s Lovecraft has achieved this through his literary ‘techniques d’assaut’ as noted above. The detailed excess of his writing is described as his ‘méthode d’attaque brutale’, a description I will consider in relation to Houellebecq’s own poetry and prose in the following chapter.²¹⁶

5. Houellebecq’s emotional spectrum

As I have demonstrated, both Houellebecq’s own conception of his writing and what he has identified in the work of Gourmont and Lovecraft resonates with Cohen’s assertion of the affective potential of writing. This ‘pathétique’ quality of Houellebecq’s own creative output will be considered in the subsequent chapters of this thesis. It is important to note, however, that a variation exists between the nature of the emotions that literature has the capacity to evoke in its readers as explored by Cohen, and the precise emotional spectrum that Houellebecq evokes in his own work.

Cohen is not restrictive about the emotions that can comprise the ‘pathétique’ within writing, for him the fact that what he describes as poetic writing has the potential to evoke emotion is proof enough of its difference from prose. The emotional content of the ‘pathème’ that Cohen isolates, is variable: ‘[c’est] le contenu éprouvé de la signification, sa tonalité particulière, variable bien sûr selon les textes’.²¹⁷ The wide range of examples of the ‘pathétique’ within poetic language that Cohen cites with *Le Haut langage* represent the broad spectrum of human emotion and also reinforce this assertion.

As the following chapters will demonstrate, Houellebecq’s novels frequently present a much narrower range of ‘pathétique’. This is also reflected in Houellebecq’s

²¹⁵ Houellebecq, ‘Rester vivant’, p. 26.

²¹⁶ Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft*, p. 52.

²¹⁷ Cohen, *Le Haut langage*, p. 158.

writing about literature. The notion of the ‘pathétique’ has, of course, long been linked with aesthetics and art criticism in terms of an artistic or rhetorical strategy. This capacity of the ‘pathétique’ within literature to evoke compassion is etymologically related to the noun ‘pathos’, which has its roots in ancient Greek, described by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as literature or a quality which ‘evokes pity, sadness, or tenderness’. The Roman rhetorician Quintilian highlighted this use of ‘pathos’ in his *Institutio Oratoria* where he asserts that it is ‘almost entirely concerned with anger, dislike, fear, hatred and pity’.²¹⁸

As I demonstrated in the previous section, ‘Rester vivant’ articulates the ‘souffrance’ Houellebecq aspires to share with his readers, in a way that appears congruent with Quintilian’s definition. Here, a text’s primary role is to evoke a ‘pathétique’ emotionality as Houellebecq notes in an extract highlighted above: ‘Toute société a ses points de moindre résistance, ses plaies. Mettez le doigt sur la plaie, et appuyez bien fort’, here metaphorically equated with causing physical pain.²¹⁹ The wounds or ‘plaies’ that Houellebecq is concerned with here, or the spectrum of emotions he aspires to evoke, are clarified in the following line: ‘Creusez les sujets dont personne ne veut entendre parler. L’envers du décor. Insistez sur la maladie, l’agonie, la laideur. Parler de la mort, et de l’oubli’.²²⁰ Houellebecq thus offers a range of themes for poetic consideration that have the potential to evoke emotional responses: ‘la maladie, l’agonie, la laideur’ as well as ‘la mort, et de l’oubli’ to which he adds ‘la jalousie, l’indifférence’, ‘la frustration’ and ‘l’absence d’amour’.²²¹ The idiomatic phrase ‘l’envers du décor’, which can be translated as ‘the other side of the picture’

²¹⁸ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, accessed online at: http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Quintilian/Institutio_Oratoria/6B*.html#2 [accessed 25 October 2012].

²¹⁹ Houellebecq, ‘Rester vivant’, p. 26.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

suggests the poet's obligation to unveil the hidden or overlooked 'pathos' within his society: 'les sujets dont personne ne veut entendre parler'.

Among the themes for 'pathétique' treatment highlighted above from 'Rester vivant', 'l'oubli' seems initially incongruous within the context of the others such as 'la mort' and 'l'absence d'amour' which appear more obviously ripe for the evocation of pathos. 'L'oubli', however, is equally related to 'la souffrance' in Houellebecq's literary sensibility, plays a significant role within his poetics and is indeed an emotional quality his work can be seen to share. In response to a question about the relationship between Houellebecq's film-making and his writing from *Art Press* magazine, he highlighted this quality:

Il y a aussi autre chose, profond chez moi, une sorte de sentiment océanique. Je n'ai pas réussi à le transcrire en films; je n'ai même pas eu vraiment l'occasion d'essayer. En mots j'ai peut-être parfois réussi, dans certains poèmes.²²²

This 'sentiment océanique' is related to 'l'oubli' and, while more immediately ambiguous than 'la mort' or 'la laideur' can certainly be ranked alongside the themes highlighted above as one of the emotional effects that Houellebecq's work strives to create.

This 'sentiment océanique' has been little considered by critics of Houellebecq, but it is crucial for a critical consideration of the full spectrum of emotionality within his writing.²²³ Chiara Falangola has highlighted it in relation to what she has described as a 'rhétorique de l'eau' within Houellebecq's writing, and stressed how his characters frequently strive to experience such a sentiment, expressed repeatedly through a desire for immersion in water.²²⁴ Falangola suggests that this 'sentiment océanique' is,

²²² Houellebecq, 'Entretien avec Jean-Yves Jouannais et Christophe Duchâtelet', *Interventions 2*, pp. 55-64 (p. 62).

²²³ Ippolito has equated the 'sentiment océanique' within Houellebecq's writing to a 'sentiment d'étrangeté', 'Le Chant du signifié', p. 109. As my analysis will reveal, there is a great deal more to this emotion than 'l'étrange'.

²²⁴ 'Grâce à la contemplation de l'eau et à la rêverie, les personnages houellebecquiens participant de la totalité de l'élément naturel et ils établissent, pour un instant, une relation intuitive avec le monde extérieur: en dissolvent les limites du soi, l'absolu poétique envahit le monde'. Chiara Falangola, 'Le

alongside the other themes that Houellebecq has highlighted, equally related to ‘la souffrance’ and can be evoked through fiction:

Ce sentiment traduit, alors, les concepts de fusion, de totalité et d’unité, mais aussi, en tant que désir d’anéantissement, la pulsion de mort. Chez Houellebecq, mourir, disparaître, veut dire dépasser, aller au-delà d’un certain espace-temps et, en conséquence, ne pas être soumis à la souffrance et au scandale d’une vie mortelle.²²⁵

In this way, this deeply ambiguous sentiment has both positive and negative implications for individual characters, but can still clearly be described in terms of emotion. The ‘sentiment océanique’ is related to death and ‘nothingness’ in that it is associated with the death (or loss, *l’oubli*) of the individual self. It equally suggests a highly-subjective transcendence of death and an end to individual suffering, particularly, as highlighted above, that associated with sexual longing. As much as it implies a proximity to death, it is also related to the notion of fusion or transcendent love.

It is equally an emotion that has been discussed by Sigmund Freud. Recounting an exchange with Romain Rolland, he describes ‘a feeling [Rolland] would like to call a sensation of “eternity”, a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded – as it were, “oceanic”’. Freud also speculates ‘it is the source of all the religious energy which is seized upon by the various Churches [...] and doubtless also exhausted by them’. Freud is sceptical, but admits ‘this gives [him] no right to deny that it does in fact occur in other people’.²²⁶ To clarify the sentiment, Falangola provides an additional example of

Sentiment océanique: pour une rhétorique de l’eau dans l’œuvre romanesque de Michel Houellebecq’, in *Michel Houellebecq à la une*, pp. 309-323 (p. 314).

²²⁵ Falangola, ‘Le Sentiment océanique’, p. 312.

²²⁶ Sigmund Freud, ‘Civilization and its Discontents’, in *The Freud Reader*, ed. by Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1989) pp. 723-724. The ‘sentiment océanique’ has been an important consideration for writers on mysticism, psychoanalysis and subjective experience. Jacques Lacan, for example, in his discussion of Bernini’s sculpture *La Transverberazione di santa Teresa d’Avila* (1652), describes the proximity of the saint’s religious experience and sexual bliss: ‘elle jouit, ça ne fait pas de doute! Et de quoi jouit-elle? Il est clair que le témoignage essentiel des mystiques c’est justement de dire qu’ils l’éprouvent mais qu’ils n’en savent rien’. The full mystical or sexual implications of the ‘sentiment océanique’ will not be considered in further detail here, but I will consider the possible maternal significance of such imagery in the following chapter. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XX: Encore* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), pp. 70-71.

Houellebecq's use of the phrase 'sentiment océanique' from *La Possibilité d'une île*, which appears to parallel Freud's description of the experience:

Il n'y a pas d'amour dans la liberté individuelle, dans l'indépendance, c'est tout simplement un mensonge, et l'un des plus grossiers qui se puisse concevoir; il n'y a d'amour que dans le désir d'anéantissement, de fusion, de disparition individuelle, dans une sorte [...] de *sentiment océanique*, dans quelque chose de tout façon qui était, au moins dans un future proche, condamné.²²⁷

This 'sentiment océanique' can be expressed both in terms of the death ('anéantissement', 'disparition individuelle') of the individual consciousness, but also as a subjective 'fusion' with the totality of life: paradoxically and concurrently a sentiment of bleak nothingness and a state of acute awareness and interconnectedness. This sensation is ambiguous, but an equally fundamental part of the 'pathétique' spectrum evoked through Houellebecq's writing and thus one that can be shared. To this end, Falangola quotes Bertrand Leclair who has also noted Houellebecq's 'désir inapaisible de faire partager le "sentiment océanique"' through his writing.²²⁸

The 'sentiment océanique' within Houellebecq's fiction, then, is not only a description of an experience desired by his characters, it can equally be understood as an experience his work strives to evoke for his readers. As I have demonstrated above, Houellebecq makes a consistent distinction in his work between the qualities of prose, associated with conceptual thought, and poetry, associated with ambiguous emotion. The 'sentiment océanique' within Houellebecq's work is evoked in the way poetry and poetic technique are brought to bear within his prose.²²⁹ As the poetic contaminates the prosaic within Houellebecq's work, the 'sentiment océanique' appears. Falangola has

²²⁷ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 421 [italics in original text].

²²⁸ Bertrand Leclair, 'Autopsie du désir', *La Quinzaine littéraire*, 745, 15 September 1998, p. 31.

²²⁹ Notably, in a public interview with writer Catherine Millet at the BNF in Paris on December 13, 2012, Houellebecq was questioned on the 'sentiment océanique' within his writing. Houellebecq described in terms of the 'dissolution de l'être', which he said was frequently evoked at the end of his novels, in particular *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d'une île* in passages that will be considered in the following chapter. Questioned further by Millet, Houellebecq suggested this was an experience brought about by an encounter with nature or the sea, but was also reminiscent of dreams and was a similar to the emotional state he personally experienced during the completion of his novels.

BNF website,

<http://www.bnf.fr/fr/evenements_et_culture/anx_conferences_2012/a.c_121213_40_ans_art_press_1.html>, [accessed 12 May, 2013].

noted that ‘quand l’élan lyrique brise la prose, la signification est suspendue dans un instant spatio-temporelles retrouvent dans l’anéantissement la perfection de l’immobilité et de l’éternité’.²³⁰ This ‘sentiment océanique’ is paradoxically, as suggested above a ‘nothingness’, but also a complete fusion with the totality of life. It is this ambiguity that much of Houellebecq’s writing appears to stimulate. Indeed, this also appears to resonate with the ‘transe poétique’ and philosophical insight that Houellebecq has noted can be brought about by Lovecraft’s writing as considered above. This is a quality of writing that Houellebecq has also noted in Cohen’s work: ‘la poésie [...] opère une dissolution générale des repères: objet, sujet, monde se fondent dans une même ambiance pathétique et lyrique’.²³¹

An example from *Plateforme* is useful since it illustrates the ambiguity of this sensation:

Un jour, à l’âge de douze ans, j’étais monté au sommet d’un pylône électrique en haute montagne. Pendant toute l’ascension, je n’avais pas regardé à mes pieds. Arrivé en haut, sur la plateforme, il m’avait paru compliqué et dangereux de redescendre. Les chaînes de montagnes s’étendaient à perte de vue, couronnées de neiges éternelles. Il aurait été beaucoup plus simple de rester sur place, ou de sauter. J’avais été retenu, *in extremis*, par la pensée de l’écrasement; mais, sinon, je crois que j’aurais pu jouir éternellement de mon vol.²³²

The sensation experienced here by the protagonist has the paradoxical hallmarks of the ‘sentiment océanique’; it is marked by the subject’s awareness of his place within the infinity of existence (‘Les chaînes de montagnes s’étendaient à perte de vue, couronnées de neiges éternelles’) but also the acute risk of falling into oblivion. It is marked both by a sense of awe at the view and an awareness of the danger which paradoxically also has the potential to be enjoyable. The experience is also acutely solitary, one that also is frequently suggests by immobility, which, as the analysis of this thesis will demonstrate, is frequently mirrored in Houellebecq’s poetry and prose as he brings the

²³⁰ Falangola, ‘Le Sentiment océanique’, p. 317.

²³¹ Houellebecq, ‘L’Absurdité créatrice’, p. 78.

²³² Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, p. 331.

ambiguities of the ‘sentiment océanique’ to bear as part of the pathetic spectrum of his writing.

6. The ‘pathétique’ and the ‘clinique’

This introduction has explored three of Houellebecq’s earliest essays and has considered how he has consistently made a distinction between reasoned thought and emotion within writing. I have suggested how this duality resonates with Jean Cohen’s notions of ‘prosaïque’ and ‘poétique’ language respectively, with the latter showing ‘pathétique’ qualities. As noted above, these essays were published before his encounter with Cohen’s work. The *Art Press* interview discussed in the previous section was published in 1995, contemporaneously with Houellebecq’s reading of Cohen, and includes a brief assertion from Houellebecq that considers his literary style and appears to show evidence of such a reading. Houellebecq describes the interdependence of two registers within his fiction:

Sur un plan [...] littéraire, je ressens vivement la nécessité de deux approches complémentaires: le pathétique et le clinique. D’un côté la dissection, l’analyse à froid, l’humour; de l’autre la participation émotive et lyrique, d’un lyrisme immédiat.²³³

The reference to the ‘pathétique’ and the ‘clinique’ here can be read as an explicit uncredited reference to Cohen. While the extract considers the same modes of experience considered throughout this chapter between the emotion of poetic language and conceptual prose, it is indeed the first time Houellebecq has described his own work as ‘pathétique’.

‘Le clinique’, however, does not immediately appear to map as readily into Cohen’s terminology, where the ‘pathétique’ is contrasted with the ‘prosaïque’ or ‘noétique’. The notions of ‘la dissection’ and ‘l’analyse à froid’ do, however appear to link the ‘clinique’ to the conceptual and intellectually analytical properties of prosaic language as highlighted by Cohen. Indeed, such terminology has already been adopted

²³³ Houellebecq, ‘Entretien avec Jean-Yves Jouannais and Christophe Duchatelet’, p. 61.

by Houellebecq in the essays considered above. In describing the reasoned approach of Gourmont's analysis, for example, he notes: 'il décortique les valeurs',²³⁴ metaphorically equating his approach with clinical dissection. In addition, in a description of Lovecraft's prose: 'plus les événements et les entités décrites seront monstrueuses et inconcevables, plus la description sera précise et clinique. Il faut un scalpel pour décortiquer l'innommable'.²³⁵

The latter citation from the Lovecraft essay is revealing since it implies that 'clinique' prose can itself also have a 'pathétique' impact in terms of their monstrosity. This will be considered in detail in the next chapter in the close consideration of Houellebecq's poems that follows. Houellebecq's assertions encourage a reading of his work along such dual irreducible yet fundamentally complementary lines, above all to ascertain how the 'participation émotive' he identifies is brought about in his creative work along the lines of the emotional spectrum outlined here.

²³⁴ Houellebecq, 'Renoncer à l'intelligence', p. 7.

²³⁵ Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft*, p. 90.

Chapter one – Houellebecq’s ‘méthode d’attaque brutale’: from poetry to prose

1. Introduction

The preceding introduction has considered how Houellebecq articulates the key principles of his poetics of writing. In particular, I have examined how he has stressed the importance of the ‘pathétique’ quality of writing to his work. This chapter, through an examination of Houellebecq’s earliest published poems, which appeared in 1988, and his first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, allows us to map the emergence of an affective voice within Houellebecq’s writing and consider how this poetics is brought to bear on his work.

This chapter is organised into two parts. The first part (sections 1-4) considers a selection of Houellebecq’s poems, the second (sections 5-6), the novel. I will initially consider how Houellebecq’s essay on H.P. Lovecraft, discussed in the above introduction, allows us to highlight self-disgust as a key theme in Houellebecq’s poetry which, as I will argue, is expressed through his writing in his own ‘méthode d’attaque brutale’.¹ I will then analyse a selection of Houellebecq’s poems to underline the techniques that are characteristic of this ‘méthode’. In particular, I will stress the poems’ visceral nature which, I will argue, resonates strongly with the work of Charles Baudelaire. I will then consider how images of self-harm and suicide are explored in Houellebecq’s poems and highlight how this is enhanced by the clinical quality of his language that is also characteristic of his prose. I will then consider how poetic technique accentuates the poems’ emotional effect before considering how they evoke the ‘sentiment océanique’ noted above.

The second section of this chapter will examine *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and consider how the voice of Houellebecq’s poetry can be mapped into his prose

¹ As noted above, this is a description Houellebecq originally made of Lovecraft’s prose style. Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft*, p. 52.

fiction. It will initially explore how the novel makes use of themes and images that are congruent with his poems. It will consider how the ‘*méthode d’attaque brutale*’ of Houellebecq’s poetic technique resonates here, in particular, through juxtaposition. I develop this approach to consider bathos in the novel and demonstrate how the text can be read along the lines of its bathetic criticism. I will proceed to suggest how Houellebecq’s use of the semicolon and repetition in his prose create a lyrical effect in the text before demonstrating that lines of ‘versified’ prose can be found within *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. I will end this chapter with a detailed close reading of two passages of the novel where I demonstrate how a ‘poetic’ reading of his fiction can prove critically rewarding and reinforce the poetic qualities of his prose writing.

2. Writing as ‘*méthode d’attaque brutale*’: from Lovecraft to Houellebecq

Despite the high contemporary profile of his prose fiction, Houellebecq initially achieved notoriety in literary circles as a poet. His first volume of poetry, *La Poursuite du bonheur*, was published in 1991.² The earliest significant work to appear under the name ‘Michel Houellebecq’, however, was a selection of seven poems that appeared in *La Nouvelle Revue de Paris*, a journal edited by the poet Michel Bulteau, in 1988.³ All of these poems were later republished in *La Poursuite du bonheur* with negligible amends.⁴ I will take this sample of Houellebecq’s early poems as a starting point for my analysis which examines a number of characteristics in terms of both techniques and themes that will resonate throughout Houellebecq’s later poems as well as his fiction.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of this early selection of poems is the emotional nature of the experiences they describe. As I shall demonstrate, these

² The collection was published by La Différence and was roughly contemporaneous with ‘Rester vivant’. *La Poursuite du bonheur* was followed by three more collections of poetry, all published after Houellebecq’s first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994): *Le Sens du combat* (1996), *Renaissance* (1999) and *Configuration du dernier rivage* (2013).

³ The name ‘Michel Houellebecq’ is a pseudonym for Michel Thomas. The young Thomas also contributed poems under the pseudonym Dorian De Smythe-Winter to the self-published journal *Karamazov* which was distributed to fellow students at the agronomy college he attended in 1977. For the early poems, see *La Nouvelle Revue de Paris*, 14, 1988, pp. 133-138.

⁴ The references that follow will be made to the versions of the poems as published in Houellebecq’s *Poésies* (2006).

experiences are evoked using techniques that appear designed to provoke an affective response. This clearly resonates with the ‘pathétique’ capacity of poetic language to create a felt ‘éprouvé’ as considered above with reference to Cohen.⁵ The emotional range of the poems considered here reflects that articulated in ‘Rester vivant’ and Houellebecq’s essay on Lovecraft, since they place the poet’s experience of ‘souffrance’ at the centre of his work. In particular, the descriptions within Houellebecq’s *Nouvelle revue de Paris* poems are intensely visceral and frequently evoke the poet’s physical body in a way that provokes disgust or repulsion. It appears Houellebecq has followed his own advice to poets to ‘Mettez le doigt sur la plaie, et appuyez bien fort’, as noted in the above introduction.⁶ As I have noted, critics have found similarities in the societal visions of both writers. Here, I argue that they can be considered together from the perspective of literary style.

Houellebecq has described how disgust plays a crucial role in Lovecraft’s writing. For him, the fantastical style of the American writer can be attributed to his broader disgust for society. Houellebecq expressed this as what he terms Lovecraft’s racism and the feelings of ‘la haine, le dégoût et la peur’ he felt upon his arrival in multi-cultural New York City.⁷ The sentiment that ‘le monde pue’ and the feeling that humans are little more than ‘cadavres gonflés, ballonnés et noirs, sur le point d’éclater dans un vomissement pestilentiel’ were refracted into Lovecraft’s writing,⁸ through the ‘dégénérescence baveuse’ of his detailed descriptions.⁹ Houellebecq has noted the ‘énergie déconcertante’ of Lovecraft’s prose where this disgust is sublimated into his evocations of horrific non-human creatures. Houellebecq has described the dense style of Lovecraft’s writing as an ‘*attaque en force*’ and in terms of its ‘brutalité’.¹⁰ This

⁵ See p. 45 above.

⁶ As considered in the previous chapter. Houellebecq, ‘Rester vivant’, p. 26.

⁷ Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft*, p. 128.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 51 [italics in original text].

results in what Houellebecq summarises as Lovecraft's 'méthode d'attaque brutale', or a product of the writer's latent disgust.¹¹

For Houellebecq, Lovecraft's 'masochism' is also important as 'la passion centrale qui anime son œuvre'.¹² The victims of the horrific creatures of Lovecraft's writing are frequently avatars for the author himself:

le rôle de la victime est généralement tenu dans ses nouvelles par un professeur d'université anglo-saxon, cultivé, réservé et bien éduqué. Plutôt un type dans son genre, en fait. Quant aux tortionnaires, aux servants des cultes innommables, ce sont presque toujours des métis, des mulâtres, des sang-mêlés "de la plus basse espèce".¹³

Houellebecq suggests that Lovecraft's racism inspires his writing in the way these mixed race 'tortionnaires' torment his characters in a manner that reflects the author's sense of victimisation through his encounters with people from different racial backgrounds. Disgust thus animates Lovecraft's work, but is refracted through such 'servants des cultes innommables' back against the author.

Masochistic disgust is also an important factor within Houellebecq's poems which explicitly cast the poet as victim. There is, however, an important divergence between the two writers: whereas Lovecraft's writing sees the author's disgust for society turned back against his protagonists, Houellebecq's poems frequently express what appears to be the poet's raw, unrefracted self-disgust. The stylistic expression of such disgust is also a key point of contrast. Lovecraft's disgust is refracted through, or sublimated into, his highly-detailed fantasy writing whereas Houellebecq's is expressed more directly through simple description and imagery. The following analysis of Houellebecq's poetry will consider what I describe as this 'méthode d'attaque brutale', where the direct expression of the poet's self-disgust, is frequently a distinctive quality. As Houellebecq has noted of Lovecraft's writing: 'la cruauté envers autrui ne donne que

¹¹ Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft*, p. 52.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 135.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

de médiocres résultats artistiques; la cruauté envers soi est autrement intéressante'.¹⁴

Houellebecq's poetry can frequently be read in terms of how it interrogates and demonstrates 'la cruauté envers soi'.¹⁵

This 'méthode d'attaque brutale' can be observed in the highly visceral nature of his poetry which frequently targets the viscera in the shocking images it exploits. The poem 'Apaisement', for example, evokes the poet's depressive experience:

L'angoisse bourgeonnait comme un essaim de vers
Cachés sous l'épiderme, hideux et très voraces;
Ils suintaient, se tordaient. J'ai saisi une paire
De ciseaux. Et puis j'ai regardé mon corps en face.¹⁶

The poet's anguish is here described with the suggestion that his body has been inhabited by a repulsive, alien presence outside of his control. The poet's skin is specifically not 'mon épiderme', implying an estrangement from his body. The worms contrast with the opening lines of the poem, which describe a harmonious 'solitude sereine' where a gentle 'manteau de brouillard descend de la rivière'.¹⁷ The worms are anything but 'sereine', they *bourgeonnaient*, 'ils suintaient, se tordaient'.

The radical step of self-harm thus appears as a logical solution to the angst represented by the worms. The poet's assertion that 'J'ai saisi une paire / De ciseaux' implies that these scissors are used on the body of the poet to find the 'apaisement' of the poem's title. A similar implication has already been made in the previous stanza: 'Hier mon corps scarifié rampait sur le dallage / Et je cherchais des yeux un couteau de

¹⁴ Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft*, p. 135.

¹⁵ Houellebecq explicitly attributes these thoughts to Antonin Artaud in this essay, but this appears to be a misremembering of Artaud's 'Le Théâtre et son double'. Artaud clarifies that his notion of cruelty is more than the 'horreur' and 'le sens matériel et rapace qui lui est prêté habituellement'. This is the cruelty that Houellebecq appears to identify within Lovecraft and, I would suggest, can frequently be located in his own writing. For Artaud, 'cruauté signifie rigueur, application et décision implacable'. While Houellebecq is correct to note that Artaud's cruelty is distinct from sadism, it is also not as completely masochistic as he seems to suggest. In Artaud's formulation, both artist and audience should be its targets in his 'théâtre de la cruauté': 'Il y a dans la cruauté qu'on exerce une sorte de déterminisme supérieur auquel le bourreau supplicateur est soumis lui-même, et qu'il doit être le cas échéant déterminé à supporter'. Antonin Artaud, 'Le Théâtre et son double', in *Œuvres complètes*, 20 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), IV, pp. 11-171 (p. 121).

¹⁶ Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft*, p. 151.

¹⁷ Houellebecq, *Poésies* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006), p. 151.

cuisine / Du sang devait couler'.¹⁸ The poet's scarred body is seemingly propelled involuntarily over the floor, it is again notably 'mon corps rampait' rather than 'je rampait', and appears intent on self-harm. The fact the body is 'scarifié' could, of course, be a metaphorical suggestion of emotional harm, but the intensely physical nature of this poem seems to suggest real physical damage and that the scissors are most appropriately viewed in terms of the physical harm they connote.

The poem is ultimately ambivalent about whether such 'apaisement' can be attained. Its concern with self-mutilation raises the possibility that it is here presented as a form of alleviation of the poet's suffering. Indeed, it is notable that the implied self-harm took place 'hier', while the poet's present is described as a moment where 'La tristesse a fini par dissiper la haine', a suggestion that some degree of appeasement or relief has been found.¹⁹ It is notable that no act of self-harm is explicitly described in the poem, raising the possibility that the poem itself acts as a form of 'apaisement' rather than the self-mutilation it describes. Alternatively, a third reading is possible: the title functions ironically, highlighting the very impossibility of any appeasement at all.

Evans has provided a reading of this poem which takes its form into account. Evans reads Houellebecq's poetry as the practical interrogation of the assertion in 'Rester vivant' that 'La structure est le seul moyen d'échapper au suicide'.²⁰ He argues that meaning in Houellebecq's poems can be located within form, particularly how they structure the poet's suffering in a way that brings its own comfort. For Evans 'c'est la forme régulière qui le retient au bord du gouffre',²¹ concluding: 'dès que la souffrance reprend le dessus, des failles apparaissent dans la forme'.²² Evans has equated the stability and harmony implied by the largely consistent use of alexandrines here with

¹⁸ Houellebecq, *Poésies*, p. 151

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Houellebecq, 'Rester vivant', p. 15.

²¹ David Evans, 'Structure et suicide dans les *Poésies* de Michel Houellebecq', in *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, pp. 201-214 (p. 205).

²² Ibid., p. 207.

the support or security which prevents the poet from committing suicide. The final two lines of the stanza quoted above, however, see the rhythm disrupted and suggest the ambiguity of self-harm within the poem.²³ Evans concludes that the reader is directly implicated in the production of meaning in the final stanza: ‘En impliquant ainsi le lecteur, la forme poétique peut articuler le conflit entre la douleur et le soulagement qui terrasse le poète’.²⁴

2a. ‘Le Baudelaire des supermarchés’

Evans is correct to stress the adherence to, and the transgression of, the formal constraints of French versification within Houellebecq’s poems, and the important role played by the reader in constructing meaning. A more visceral reading of Houellebecq’s poetry is also possible that takes the intertextual presence of the work of Charles Baudelaire into consideration.²⁵ Indeed, Baudelaire sits alongside Lovecraft as a key point of reference. Houellebecq has repeatedly expressed his admiration for the poet and has himself been described as the ‘Baudelaire des supermarchés’ by Noguez.²⁶ Using ‘Apaisement’ as a starting point we shall consider the relationship between three striking images in the work of both poets: worms, rotting flesh and self-harm.

The reference to ‘un essaim de vers’ in ‘Apaisement’ is interesting since it exploits the polysemy within French of ‘vers’ meaning both worms and poetic verse. In

²³ ‘Bien que le point dans l’avant-dernier vers renforce la césure, soulignant la pause dans notre lecture, celui du vers suivant interrompt le rythme de l’hémistiche pour mettre en relief le rejet “De ciseaux”. Au moment où le désir suicidaire menace de submerger le poète, le rythme qu’il avait qualifié de protecteur se brise, le dernier vers comprenant treize syllabes difficilement récupérables. Ici la forme poétique constitue une mise en scène saisissante du dilemme du poète se contemplant au miroir, hésitant entre action et réflexion. Si le lecteur sent que le contexte métrique est suffisamment fort, il tâchera de respecter le décompte syllabique en réduisant “regardé”, non sans difficulté, à deux syllabes; s’il le laisse influencer par la multiplication des irrégularités rythmiques, il privilégiera peut-être une lecture bancale’. Evans, ‘Structure et suicide dans les *Poésies* de Michel Houellebecq’, p. 208.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Evans briefly notes the thematic similarities in the work of the two writers, Ibid., p. 204. Julia Pröll has considered how both writers articulate an experience of the modern city or ‘l’aventure urbaine splénétique’. Julia Pröll, ‘Michel Houellebecq: sur les pas de Charles Baudelaire?’, *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, pp. 53-68 (p. 55).

²⁶ ‘Pour moi, [Baudelaire] reste le plus grand des poètes, et donc le plus grand des écrivains’, Josyane Savigneau, ‘Michel Houellebecq: “Tout ce que la science permet sera réalisé”’ (para. 32 of 35). Noguez has used this comparison of the two writers to describe the juxtaposition of formal versified poetry and a contemporary setting which takes place ‘dans un cadre urbain’. Noguez, *Houellebecq, en fait*, p. 30.

this way, the poem suggests the poet's uneasy relationship with poetry: the 'essaim de vers' under his skin is both the source of his suffering and simultaneously a way of achieving the 'apaisement' of the poem's title through its composition. Baudelaire has exploited the same polysemy and thus sets an important precedent for Houellebecq. In 'Le Mort joyeux', the poet invokes 'Ô vers! noirs compagnons sans oreille et sans yeux, / Voyez venir à vous un mort libre et joyeux',²⁷ where he offers his corpse to be devoured by worms, also suggesting the parasitic nature of poetry to which the poet offers himself. Similarly, 'Spleen (J'ai plus de souvenirs)' makes use of the same image: 'Je suis un cimetière abhorré de la lune, / Où comme des remords se traînent de longs vers / Qui s'acharnent toujours sur mes morts les plus chers',²⁸ where the worms/verse are similarly nourished by death and decay. For both Baudelaire and Houellebecq it is notable that the body of the poet is the site where the worms/verse act; for the former the body is devoured, for the latter, they are 'cachés sous l'épiderme'.

Kathryn Oliver Mills reads this process within Baudelaire's work and suggests the equivalence of worms and poetry can be attributed to the process of decomposition: 'The "vers"/worms that devour the cadaver ultimately become the "vers" of the poet's art: while worms break down physical reality, verse eliminates the natural world altogether'.²⁹ This notion of decomposition implies a dual role for the 'vers'/worms within Baudelaire's poetry. The worms are destructive, but in breaking down the physical world, they are also a symbol for the poet who 'decomposes' his own reality through his poetry, making his experience comprehensible. Houellebecq's 'essaim de vers', however, is not here explicitly devouring the poet's body or decomposing reality (rather 'Ils suintaient, se tordaient'). The worms are, above all, a repellent symbol of his suffering.

²⁷ Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), p. 83.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 85.

²⁹ Kathryn Oliver Mills, *Formal Revolution in the work of Baudelaire and Flaubert* (Plymouth: University of Delaware Press, 2012), p. 57.

Indeed, rather than a metaphor, it is equally possible that the sensation of worms reflect the poet's own lived experience. Houellebecq has noted that his early life, contemporaneous with the writing of this poem, was marked by periods of medical treatment for depression.³⁰ Significantly, the *DSM-IV*, the psychiatric industry handbook, explicitly states the 'crawling sensation of worms or ants' under the skin is a symptom, termed delusional parasitosis, patients suffering from a 'major depressive episode' have been known to report.³¹ In addition, a review related to delusional parasitosis in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* has also explicitly associated the disorder with major depression.³²

2b. Houellebecq, Baudelaire and the body

The human form is frequently described within Houellebecq's poems in a visceral manner that highlights the poet's sense of estrangement from his body. In 'La Fêlure', another of the *Nouvelle revue de Paris* poems, the poet's body is objectified as 'une chose sanglante et rouge'.³³ In Houellebecq's writing, the human body is frequently little more than a physical presence, demystified flesh rather than a human being. This is a technique observable elsewhere in Houellebecq's poetry. In *La Poursuite du Bonheur*, for example, the poet's body is similarly described as 'un sac traversé de fils rouge',³⁴ and a hospital is evoked where 'les vieux oubliés se transforment en organes'.³⁵ Such gruesome assertions of the body as demystified 'meat', rather than sacred body, has a pertinent point of comparison in Baudelaire's 'Une Charogne'.³⁶ Here, a rotting animal corpse is compared to a living human. It is both 'une femme

³⁰ In interview, Houellebecq has noted: 'J'étais systématiquement diagnostiqué comme dépressif'. Mark Weitzmann, "'J'ai plus que des doutes'", *Les Inrockuptibles*, 10 April 1996, pp. 56-59 (p. 58).

³¹ *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV*, p. 355.

³² Peter Lepping, 'Antipsychotic treatment of primary delusional parasitosis', *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 191 (2007), 198-205.

³³ Houellebecq, *Poésies*, p. 150.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

³⁶ As Maggie Nelson notes, the consideration of the 'body-made-meat' is also a consistent preoccupation of twentieth century visual art (Francis Bacon), writing (Franz Kafka) and film (the contemporary horror movie). Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty* (London: Norton, 2011), pp. 175-190.

lubrique’ and what the poet’s beloved will become: ‘vous serez semblable à cette ordure’.³⁷ Baudelaire’s poem also resonates with Houellebecq’s work in terms of its provocative visceral detail. It contains, for example the repulsive poetic images of ‘Les mouches bourdonnaient sur ce ventre putride’ and ‘De larves, qui coulaient comme un épais liquide’ that both implicitly recall the ‘vers’ considered above.³⁸

There are, however, two important differences between Houellebecq’s poems and ‘Une Charogne’. Firstly, Baudelaire’s poem has a distinct tone, ironically tinged with jubilation, which celebrates both the proximity of life to death and revels in the sensuous spectacle of the ‘étrange musique’ of the decomposing ‘carcasse superbe’.³⁹ The tone of Houellebecq’s ‘Apaisement’, for example, is more resigned to the poet’s ‘infinie solitude’, a contrast highlighted by the softer, downbeat vowel sounds at the end of the lines in Houellebecq’s poem and the harsher consonants of the end of line rhymes in Baudelaire’s text. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, is the difference of addressee. ‘Une Charogne’ appears to address a beloved: ‘mon âme’ and ‘ma beauté’ are both referred to. Baudelaire’s cadaver is compared to a third party: ‘telle vous serez, ô reine des grâces’.⁴⁰

In Houellebecq’s poetry, however, the focus of the poet’s disgust is primarily the poet himself. A poem from his second collection, *Le Sens du combat*, is particularly striking in this regard. In terms of subject matter, it also implicitly recalls ‘Une Charogne’ since it is equally concerned with decaying flesh. Here, the rotting flesh forms part of the poet’s own body: ‘Le lobe de mon oreille droite est gonflé de pus et de sang’.⁴¹ The poet continues: ‘je pense au pourrissement prochain de mon corps [...] Je

³⁷ Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, pp. 63-64.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Wright has suggested the poem is addressed to Jeanne Duval, one of Baudelaire’s lovers. Barbara Wright, ‘Baudelaire’s poetic journey in *Les Fleurs du Mal*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire*, ed. Rosemary Lloyd, pp. 31-50 (p. 36).

⁴¹ Houellebecq, *Poésies*, p. 20.

pense également et symétriquement [...] au pourrissement et au déclin de l'Europe'.⁴² Not only is the poet's own body set to rot, but his self-disgust is so extreme he anticipates, not without irony, his own suffering to be contagious enough to contaminate the fortunes of the outside world.

Another important poem by Baudelaire that allows us to consider the nature of self-disgust in Houellebecq's poetry is 'L'Héautontimorouménos', translated into English as 'the self-torturer'.⁴³ Baudelaire asserts the accursed nature of the poet's experience and suggests suffering is inescapably bound up with poetic creation. There are two distinct sides to the poet's personality:

Je suis la plaie et le couteau!
Je suis le soufflet et la joue!
Je suis les membres et la roue,
Et la victime et le bourreau!⁴⁴

The poet is a metaphorical 'torturer' in that he is able to exploit others for material for his art ('Je te frapperai sans colère'), but he is equally victim since he is compelled to view himself via the same ironic perspective through which he looks outside. As the poet must be ruthless in his treatment of others, he is condemned to be similarly unsparing in his self-examination. The poet is able to quench his 'désir' on 'tes pleurs salés' but remains concurrently at the mercy of his own perspective anchored in poetic irony: 'Qui me secoue et qui me mord'.⁴⁵

There is a rhythmic harmony to the octosyllabic metre of Baudelaire's poem that implies the poet has reconciled the ambivalence between 'plaie'/'couteau' and victim/torturer. This is reinforced in the above stanza by the repeated confident affirmation 'je suis'. Such a harmony suggests a comfortable synthesis between the

⁴² Houellebecq, *Poésies*, p. 20.

⁴³ Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. by P. J. W. Higson and E. R. Ashe. (Chester: Cestrian Press, 1975), p. 82.

⁴⁴ Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, p. 91.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

opposing terms and indicates the poet has accepted his despair or his position as ‘un faux accord / Dans la divine symphonie’,⁴⁶ and is content in his paradoxical position.

There is no such comfortable synthesis within much of Houellebecq’s poetry which remains anchored in despair. In ‘La Fêlure’, the assertions that ‘Je me souviens très bien du temps de l’espérance’ and ‘je crois que j’en suis à mon tout dernier rôle’,⁴⁷ suggest the poet has abandoned hope of doing anything other than wallowing in his depression. Such lack of hope is reinforced by the poem’s final stanza, which is notable for its absence of harmonious resolution:

Tu sais je l’ai compris dès la première seconde,
Il faisait un peu froid et je suis de peur
Le pont était brisé, il était dix-neuf heures
La fêlure était là, silencieuse et profonde.⁴⁸

This poem can be read in alexandrines, but the metre does not scan as harmoniously as Baudelaire’s. The ‘il était dix-neuf heures’, for example, sits uncomfortably in the third line. Following Evans’ analysis considered above, such a metrical disruption can be read as a suggestion of the poet’s mental disquiet. There are two key visual images that also reinforce the poet’s lack of hope. The broken bridge suggests a feeling of permanent estrangement from the ‘gens autour’ considered earlier in the poem. In the final line, the poet identifies with ‘La fêlure’ itself, an unfilled gap, both ‘silencieuse et profonde’, and a simple metaphor for his own cracked or broken existence.

2c. Self-harm and suicide

In addition to ‘Apaisement’, Houellebecq’s poems frequently suggest self-harm or suicide as a way of escaping suffering. These assertions are disturbingly accentuated through the brutality of his poetic technique. ‘Il est vingt et une heures’ presents an unsteady relationship between appeasement and self-harm.⁴⁹ The poet declares: ‘J’ai

⁴⁶ Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, p. 91.

⁴⁷ Houellebecq, *Poésies*, p. 150.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 135. Other early poems that suggest suicide see the poet assert ‘mon but n’est pas dans cette vie’ and ‘Je n’ai pas envie de vivre’. Ibid., pp. 116-117.

acheté du pain et du fromage en tranches, / Ça devrait m'éviter de crever mon oeil droit'.⁵⁰ In his darkly ironic assertion, the reader is invited to consider the extent to which sliced cheese and bread could realistically offer any relief to the poet's intention to self-harm. The final stanza of the poem appears devoid of such irony:

S'il y a quelqu'un qui m'aime, sur Terre ou dans les astres
Il devrait maintenant me faire un petit signe
Je sens s'accumuler les prémices d'un désastre,
Le rasoir dans mon bras trace un trait rectiligne.⁵¹

There is a notable contrast here between the harmony and continuity of the dodecasyllabic metre of the poem, the *astres/désastre* and *signe/rectiligne* rhymes and finality of the implied suicide.

The potential of poetic language to produce an emotional effect on the reader is also important here since poetic technique accentuates the poet's suffering as the poem slides from a fruitless plea for help towards suicide. The direct expression of the implied suicide in the last line of the stanza appears designed to create an emotional response. As well as a reflection of the poet's emotional state, it also operates as what Cohen has described as 'un éprouvé', the capacity for that emotion to be conveyed through poetic language. The first two lines of the stanza are a semi-hopeful call for help, but this is starkly contrasted with the physical presence of the razor blade in the final line, accentuated by the immediacy of the present tense. The precision of the blade is mirrored by the metre of the final line of the stanza, which is expressed in perfect alexandrines, and contrasts with the previous line, due to the stuttering hesitancy of the first hemistich, with the dissonant consonants of 'Je sens s'accumuler'. This overall effect is rendered more brutal through the fact this is the final poem in the *La Nouvelle revue de Paris* collection.⁵²

⁵⁰ Houellebecq, *Poésies*, p. 135.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² This effect was retained and enhanced when the poem was collected in *La Poursuite du bonheur* since the poem is the last poem in the first of four sections, and is followed by a blank page.

3. The ‘clinique’ in Houellebecq’s poems

Oblique metaphysical reflection is frequently interjected by precise, clinical description in a similar way to the previous example in Houellebecq’s poems. This is particularly noticeable in the language associated with incision which frequently and strikingly interrupts the vague mood of the poem. The razor blade of ‘Il est vingt et une heures’ emerges against the background of emotional despair, played out against a vague setting of a Sunday evening at the start of the holiday period. In addition, the aeroplane of ‘Variation 49’, the first poem in the *Nouvelle Revue de Paris* collection, ‘sectionne’ the landscape and forms a contrast with the vagueness of the poem’s clouds and the ‘l’épaisseur de l’espace’.⁵³ The knife and scissors of ‘Apaisement’ also form a material contrast with the ambiguities of the poem’s crepuscular setting and the poet’s despair.

As previously considered, Houellebecq has described his writing in terms of two registers, the ‘pathétique’ and the ‘clinique’. In these poems, it is possible to observe both registers at work as an ambiguous emotionality is frequently interjected by precision. There is also a clear semantic resonance between the vocabulary of incision as used in these early poems under present consideration and what Houellebecq describes as the ‘clinique’ register within his writing.⁵⁴ This register is described in terms of ‘dissection’, raising the possibility that incision as part of Houellebecq’s literary technique is represented metaphorically in these poems in that it possesses a similar degree of intensity or violence to clinical incision. In this way, the ‘pathétique’ or emotional quality is contrasted with, but also supported by, the ‘clinique’, deepening

⁵³ Houellebecq, *Poésies*, p. 183.

⁵⁴ The *Trésor de la langue française informatisé (TLFi)* stresses the scientific usage of the adjective ‘clinique’. From the perspective of style, the resource suggests the precision associated with the domain of medicine, ‘qui a la sécheresse d’écriture d’un diagnostic clinique’, suggesting ‘clinique’, when attributed to writing can describe both precise style, one suited to science, as well as explicitly using the language and vocabulary of science. The *TLFi* additionally highlights that the word connotes the observation and diagnosis of a medical symptom. In this way writing described as ‘clinique’ can also demonstrate an analytical approach. In his description of the ‘clinique’ considered above, Houellebecq is careful to describe the ‘clinique’ as an ‘approche’ rather than simply a choice of vocabulary. *Trésor de la langue française informatisé*
<<http://atilf.atilf.fr/dendien/scripts/tlfiv5/visusel.exe?12;s=2089004370;r=1;nat=;sol=3;>> [accessed 24 March 2012].

the overall emotional potential. Interjections of the latter are marked by their abruptness, definitiveness and the subsequent brutal shock their incongruity has the potential to provoke.

Subversion by means of precision is also notable from the perspective of form and this technique can be observed in the concluding lines of Houellebecq's stanzas and poems. This lends his poetry a degree of abrupt brutality, suggesting an intense finality or developing the idea explored in that stanza or poem in an unanticipated direction. Evans notes the comic potential of such a technique and describes how the final lines of Houellebecq's stanzas frequently present 'une chute pathétique dont le ton tantôt désespéré, tantôt pince-sans-rire est souligné par l'inévitabilité de la rime'.⁵⁵ He cites the following stanza:

J'admire énormément les vaches
 Mais les pouliches, le soir, j'y pense.
 J'aurais aimé être un Apache,
 Mais je travaille à la Défense.⁵⁶

This technique frequently also introduces a more complex effect than humour. This is particularly significant in 'Il est vingt et une heures' and in the concluding stanza of 'Dernier temps':

Il y aura la mort tu le sais mon amour
 Il y aura le malheur et les tout derniers jours
 On n'oublie jamais rien, les mots et les visages
 Flottent joyeusement jusqu'au dernier rivage
 Il y aura le regret, puis un sommeil très lourd.⁵⁷

The poem is a consideration of the inevitability of 'temps difficiles' and a pessimistic succession of images evoking relationship difficulties and the impossibility of communication, 'lettres écrites et déchirées', with a growing sense of dread, ('Il y aura la peur qui me suit sans parler'). Despite its pessimism, reinforced by the bleak image of

⁵⁵ Evans, 'Structure et suicide dans les *Poésies* de Michel Houellebecq', p. 203.

⁵⁶ Houellebecq, *Poésies*, p. 32.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

despair, ‘on pleure bêtement, les deux bras sur la table’,⁵⁸ the fluent progression suggested by poem’s rhyme scheme and metre could clearly lead the reader to anticipate that the opening lines of the first and second stanzas of the poem, respectively, ‘Il y aura des journées et des temps difficiles’ and ‘Il y aura des lettres écrites et déchirées’ will be followed by a final, ‘mais...’, providing a more optimistic resolution, suggesting how life will improve once these challenges have been overcome.⁵⁹

This final stanza subverts any such expectations with a ‘chute pathétique’ of a different order. Life will continue to provide an ever-greater number of memories, perhaps of happier times that will remain out of grasp or unhappy times that will float goadingly: ‘les mots et les visages / Flottent joyeusement jusqu’au dernier rivage’. The word ‘joyeusement’ here has a sarcastically ironic impact at odds with the inevitability of suffering the incessant rhythm of the poem suggests. The final line is notable for the categorical nature of the finality it expresses, all the ‘amour’ to whom the poem is addressed has to look forward to its death, ‘un sommeil très lourd’. This concluding line is, in effect, a brutal, abrupt summary of the poem’s pessimism, reinforced by the maudlin assonance of the lengthened vowel sounds (‘sommeil’, ‘lourd’). The poem ends abruptly and definitively, cancelling out any hope or alternative to death or unhappiness. The final word, ‘lourd’, provides a counterpoint to the image of joyous floating in the previous line, implying both sinking and the moment of death. The directness and immediacy of death in the final line, potentially an implied suicide is unexpectedly brutal.

The final lines of Houellebecq’s stanzas are also frequently marked by another form of brutal abruptness in the way they juxtapose logically unrelated ideas. Houellebecq’s closing sentences often seem to maintain a tangential relationship with the images developed in the preceding lines. In the final stanza of ‘Apaisement’:

⁵⁸ Houellebecq, *Poésies*, p. 60.

⁵⁹ As with the poem ‘Il est vingt et une heures’ considered above, the impact of the final line of ‘Dernier temps’ is also increased by its position at the end of the second section of *La Poursuite du bonheur*.

Tout seul au point du jour – infinie solitude
 La rivière charrie des monceaux de cadavres
 Je plane à la recherche de nouvelles latitudes,
 Un caboteur poussif remonte vers Le Havre.⁶⁰

Despite the sense of depression evoked by the poem, the notion of the poet soaring ('je plane') to 'nouvelles latitudes' appears to introduce a degree of hope or alleviation of the poet's suffering. The final line, however, is considerably more ambivalent and partially undermines any hope that may exist. While the 'caboteur poussif' possesses a broad semantic relationship to 'la rivière', this small boat is particularly striking because of its banality in comparison with the intense emotional struggle of the previous lines. This line is also logically redundant within the context of the poem. It can be read as a reminder of the quotidian world that endures, from which the poet feels alienated. This technique also suggests the poet's mental distraction; he is unable to focus entirely on his 'nouvelles latitudes', and is distracted by everyday reality represented by a boat. Its incongruity also lends the poem's final lines an absurd or comic quality, which resonates with the 'chute pathétique' noted by Evans. In Houellebecq's prose as well as his poetry, these apparent digressions are intensely ambiguous: they appear conclusive and important but they are paradoxically and concurrently both vague and intensely trivial. There may not, of course, be any one distinct meaning that can be attributed to such an image and the 'caboteur poussif' within the poem is notable for its ambiguous juxtaposition.

4. The ambiguous 'sentiment océanique'

There is equally a high degree of subtlety and ambiguity to the emotional experience Houellebecq's poems evoke. This experience appears congruent with what he has described in terms of the 'sentiment océanique' rather than the violence considered so far in this chapter.

⁶⁰ Houellebecq, *Poésies*, p. 151.

‘Variation 49: Le Dernier Voyage’, is interesting from such a perspective. This poem is less important in terms of the specific experience it describes, than its overall ambiguous mood and images. It is, for example, impossible to clarify if the poem describes a plane crash, as the title, the reference to ‘un souffle de mort’ and the threatening ‘orage’ appear to suggest, or a more personal, emotional experience.

The opening lines initially recall the images of incision considered above:

Un triangle d’acier sectionne le paysage;
L’avion s’immobilise au-dessus des nuages.⁶¹

The verb ‘sectionner’ is typically used as a synonym for ‘couper’ meaning to cut or divide, suggesting, a violent or fast movement. Such motion is, however, undermined here by the following verb which suggests what appears to be the aeroplane’s immobility above the clouds. Naturally, an aeroplane must travel at a consistently high speed to remain in the air, but it is perceived by the poet in terms of the stillness with which he identifies. Rather than the precision frequently observed in Houellebecq’s poems as considered above, there is an ambivalent tension in the juxtaposition of these two lines that establish its overall inconclusive tone.

The poem as a whole displays a movement away from the precise detail of the first line and towards obscurity as the stanzas progress. Much of the language suggests the vagueness of forms and blurring of detail associated with clouds: ‘nuages’, ‘un orage’ and ‘un souffle de mort’. This imprecision is particularly evident in the final stanza:

Nos regards s’entrecroisent, interrogeant en vain
L’épaisseur de l’espace
Dont la blancheur fatale enveloppe nos mains
Comme un halo de glace.

There are three important visual images in this extract that all relate to the clouds mentioned in the second line of the poem which recur in various forms within

⁶¹ Houellebecq, *Poésies*, p. 183.

Houellebecq's poetry. The oxymoronic 'épaisseur de l'espace' and the 'blancheur fatale' here suggest that the poet and his companion are themselves increasingly immersed in cloud. In this way, the poet's relationship becomes blurred or 'clouded' in ambiguity: his ability to perceive the world becomes less precise and communication becomes difficult. There is, however, no attempt to escape such a state of affairs, rather a resigned acceptance of it.

The final image, 'un halo de glace', is notable since it is also used in the third stanza of 'Dernier Temps', considered above. In that poem the phrase is equated with 'la peur qui me suit sans parler': 'Elle descend sur le monde comme un halo de glace'. A 'halo' is, of course, frequently found in religious imagery and suggests an ethereal or sanctified 'glow' surrounding an individual figure. The *Trésor de la langue française*, suggests a halo is equally a natural phenomenon 'dû à la réfraction de la lumière dans de minuscules cristaux de glace en suspension dans l'atmosphère lorsque celle-ci est brumeuse, vaporeuse', a semi-opaque phenomenon that should also be ranked alongside the images of vagueness considered here.

Ambiguity of setting is also notable in 'Vocation Religieuse' and 'Passage' which are unusual in Houellebecq's poetry since they evoke an obscure fantasy setting rather than the contemporary urbanity which dominates his other poetry. In 'Vocation Religieuse' the description is removed from reality:

Je suis dans un tunnel fait de roches compactes;
 Sur ma gauche à deux pas un homme sans paupières
 M'enveloppe des yeux. Il se dit libre et fier;
 Très loin, plus loin que tout, gronde une cataracte.⁶²

The 'tunnel fait de roches compactes', the 'homme sans paupières', and 'cataracte' of the above extract are joined in this poem by the 'pays des glaïeuls' and the final oblique image: 'Sur le sol gris serpente un trait profond et dense, / Comme l'arc aboli d'un

⁶² Houellebecq, *Poésies*, p. 186.

ancien rituel'.⁶³ This poem can be read both in terms of how it articulates the solitary experience of the poet and in terms of the ambiguous overall sensation it creates. In this way it can be considered alongside 'Il est vingt et une heures' and 'Apaisement' in how it describes the poet's solitary suffering. The title 'Vocation Religieuse' suggests the poet's experience is monastic or involves devotion to an individual quest. Life is compared to a struggle through 'un tunnel fait de roches compactes' towards a distant ideal ('une cataracte') and a distant and equally idealised past: '[le] pays des glaïeuls'.

Reading the poem in this way is problematic due to the resolutely oblique nature of its symbols. The 'trait profond et dense', 'comme l'arc aboli d'un ancien rituel', particularly appears to resist interpretation. It is perhaps, again the case that the ambiguity of the poem and the overall experience of reading it are key here. Indeed it is its very strangeness that reflects the 'merveillement' and 'enchantement' that Houellebecq notes in the work of H.P. Lovecraft as considered in the above introduction. Indeed the tunnel of basalt, references to ancient rites and rituals and the horrific 'homme sans paupières' are also images that themselves resonate with the world created by Lovecraft's fiction.

Through the strangeness of the description in this poem, Houellebecq creates an overall sensation of deep ambiguity. Indeed here, Houellebecq appears to suggestively create a poetic world. As noted by Cohen, one of the qualities of poetic language is its 'totalising' power which means that, 'délivrés de toute opposition, les mots retrouvent leur identité à soi et du même coup leur totale plénitude sémantique'.⁶⁴ In such a way, Houellebecq's use of poetic language here asserts the distinction between conceptual prose and the abstract emotionality associated with poetic language as made in his essay on Gourmont and considered in the above introduction. The obliqueness of the imagery used in these poems this heightens their poetic ambiguity, and suggests they are most

⁶³ Houellebecq, *Poésies*, p. 186.

⁶⁴ Cohen, *Le Haut langage*, p. 126.

appropriately appreciated in terms of the ambiguous ‘enchancement’ they bring about, rather than their immediate interpretability or meaning within the system of language. In such a way, the immediate, referent which the poems describe are less important than their suggestive potential. As Jakobson argues, ‘The supremacy of the poetic function over the referential function does not obliterate the reference but makes it ambiguous’, a point that would appear to be reinforced by such poems.⁶⁵ The strangeness of the fantasy world evoked in this poem is thus itself a realization of such a poetic quality of language. By means of its oblique fantasy setting, ‘Vocation Religieuse’ also provides the poet with a degree of escapism in a similar way to that noted above in Lovecraft. He is, to a certain extent, here able to turn his back on his contemporary society and, like the ‘homme sans paupières’ is able to be ‘libre et fier’.

‘Passage’ is similar in that it also uses fantastical, pseudo-Lovecraftian imagery to evoke a similar sense of emotional ‘enchancement’ and describe a world of ambiguous sensation equally at a remove from the everyday. The poem similarly describes the poet’s progression through a vague landscape. The metaphorical intent of the dense images is again unclear. The third stanza appears particularly oblique:

Et les volontés nues refusaient de mourir.
 Venus de Birmanie, deux de nos compagnons,
 Les traits décomposés par un affreux sourire,
 Glissaient dans l’interorbe du Signe du Scorpion.⁶⁶

Whilst the first line suggests a determination in the face of the challenges considered above, the Burmese companions and their mysterious disappearance appear notable above all for the exotic strangeness of their description. The reference to ‘l’interorbe du Signe du Scorpion’ juxtaposes an astronomical reference, again typical of Lovecraft’s work with what appears to be a contemporary reference to computer jargon, since

⁶⁵ Jakobson, ‘Linguistics and Poetics’, p. 371. Jakobson also notes that ambiguity is ‘an intrinsic, inalienable character of any self-focused message [...], a corollary feature of poetry’. Ibid.

⁶⁶ Houellebecq, *Poésies*, p. 188.

‘Inter-ORB’ is an internet coding protocol.⁶⁷ The following stanza similarly makes use of oblique references to the ‘monts du Capricorne’ and ‘Les sombre entrelacs du pays de Fangorn’.⁶⁸ The latter reference also appears drawn from within the realms of fantasy literature since ‘Fangorn’ is the name of a forest in JRR Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* (1954). Rather than a specific, fixed interpretation of these lines, I suggest they are most notable by virtue of the overall strangeness, or ‘émerveillement’, they can create and how they evoke a fantastical realm removed from the poet and reader’s contemporary experience.

Alongside these obscure fantastical evocations, there appears to be a clear goal to the journey undertaken by the poet in ‘Passage’ which results in an ambiguously optimistic ending, atypical of the other *Nouvelle Revue de Paris* poems. The poet’s final destination, mentioned here as ‘l’ultime archipel’ is less a physical place, however, than an experience.⁶⁹ Indeed, it is described in terms that directly evoke the ‘sentiment océanique’ where the individual subject ‘loses’ himself in his surroundings, considered above. This ‘ultime archipel’ is described in terms of its vagueness:

C’est un plan incliné environné de brume;
 Les rayons du soleil y sont toujours obliques.
 Tout paraît recouvert d’asphalte et de bitume,
 Mais rien n’obéit plus aux lois mathématiques.⁷⁰

This is a place completely opposite to contemporary experience, indeed one where the laws of reason or physics do not apply. This is reinforced by an earlier description where: ‘tout sens se dissout hormis le sens tactile’.⁷¹ There is a reference to the ‘asphalte et du bitume’ of the contemporary city, but this is a point of comparison, it is eminently more vague and ‘environné de brume’. Indeed, such a description also resonates with observation made in Lovecraft’s work where R’lyeh, the lair of the

⁶⁷ This is a vocabulary Houellebecq has an awareness of after spending some of his younger years working as a computer technician.

⁶⁸ Houellebecq, *Poésies*, p. 188.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 189.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 188.

sinister presence of Cthulu, is described in similar terms: ‘the *geometry* of the dream place he saw was abnormal, non-Euclidean, and loathsomely redolent of spheres and dimensions apart from ours’.⁷²

5. Themes, images and poetic technique in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*

There are extensive resonances between Houellebecq’s early poetry and *Extension du domaine de la lutte* that suggest a shared sensibility between the voice of the poet and the voice that can be noted in his fiction. Initially I shall consider the resonance of themes and imagery before considering equivalences that can be drawn between poetic technique and that of Houellebecq’s fictive prose. This is an important critical endeavour since these poems, originally collected in the *Nouvelle Revue de Paris*, published in 1988 and conceivably written in the preceding years, appear to be contemporaneous with the period in which *Extension du domain de la lutte* is set. The novel was published in 1994, but the historical events it describes, appear to situate the narrative in the winter of 1986-1987, a period during which Houellebecq was also writing poetry, and could suggest a hitherto unnoted contemporaneity between the two bodies of work.⁷³

The bleak tone of these poems may directly reflect Houellebecq’s own personal experiences. Demonpion suggests that the author was himself affected by depression during the preparatory period for *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and, when the poems printed in *La Nouvelle Revue de Paris* were written.⁷⁴ In such a way, the depressed poetic voice of the poems is joined to the depressed narrative voice of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* by what appears to be a depressed author. Such a relationship

⁷² H.P. Lovecraft, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’, in *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories* (London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 139-169 (p. 166) [italics in original text].

⁷³ Although *Extension du domaine de la lutte* was not published until 1994, the glimpses of events from real contemporary French history, namely the Islamist terrorist attacks on the Champs-Élysées Renault showroom and the post office at Hôtel de Ville in Paris as well as the student protests that give a violent background to the plot, allow us to situate the events in the narrative between September 1986 and early 1987 and suggest the novel is set, or was even written, during this precise period.

⁷⁴ Demonpion, *Houellebecq non autorisé*, p. 116.

between Houellebecq's poetry and prose has been noted by Lakis Proguidis who has suggested that the authentic biographical voice of Houellebecq is present within his early poetry as well as the novel.⁷⁵ Proguidis has added that while *Extension du domaine de la lutte* is mediated through a narrator, this frequently 'slips': 'un abandon de l'autonomie du personnage au profit de la voix unique de l'auteur' so that the reader is confronted directly with the bleakly depressive author himself.⁷⁶

The self-disgust, feelings of extreme worthlessness and the visceral fantasies of self-harm discussed above can all be observed within *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. This is most evident in the final section of the novel where the narrator descends into a deep depression.⁷⁷ He asserts: 'Je sens des choses qui se brisent en moi, comme des parois de verre qui éclatent'.⁷⁸ Notably, the images of self-harm here reflect the repugnant imagery of Houellebecq's poems. The scissors of 'Apaisement' and the eye of 'Il est vingt et une heures' considered above are united in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*'s suggestions of enucleation:

J'ai deux paires de ciseaux, une dans chaque pièce. Je les regroupe et je les place sous quelques livres. C'est un effort de la volonté, probablement insuffisant. L'envie persiste, grandit et se transforme. Cette fois mon projet est de prendre une paire de ciseaux, de les planter dans mes yeux et d'arracher. Plus précisément dans l'œil gauche, à un endroit que je connais bien, là où il apparaît si creux dans l'orbite.⁷⁹

Elsewhere, the narrator's penis is also posited for mutilation in an extension of the images of incision noted above:

Il y a des ciseaux sur la table près de mon lit. L'idée s'impose: trancher mon sexe. Je m'imagine la paire de ciseaux à la main, la brève résistance des chairs, et soudain le moignon sanguinolent et l'évanouissement probable. Le moignon, sur la moquette. Collé de sang.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Lakis Proguidis, 'Michel Houellebecq, de la poésie au roman', *L'Atelier du roman*, 9 (1996), pp. 180-186.

⁷⁶ The relationship between biographical author and narrating character will be considered in more detail in Chapter Three of the present work.

⁷⁷ He is medically diagnosed: 'je suis en dépression'. Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 135.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 142-143. It is important to stress the sexual dimension in this fantasy of self-harm. As noted in the introduction, Houellebecq's protagonists are frequently portrayed in terms of their inability to find

As in Houellebecq's poetry, these images brutally suggest the poet's self-disgust through direct, simply-expressed language. The common element in the poems and the novels is their status as fantasy. Indeed, the one instance when self-harm is actually performed in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, as the narrator cuts himself after launching a tin of peas at his bathroom mirror,⁸¹ is undermined later in the text, rendering its status ultimately ambiguous: 'Je me souviens que plus tôt dans la soirée, juste avant de partir, j'ai cassée une vitre d'un coup de poing. Pourtant, bizarrement, ma main est intacte; aucune coupure'.⁸² Houellebecq's novel remains as ambivalent on the subject of self-harm as his poems: it is unclear if the narrator's self disgust extends to a real desire to self-harm or if it remains a fantasy considered through the act of writing. This perhaps suggests, as considered above in reference to the poem 'Apaisement', that writing is itself a form of relief or sublimated self-harm. The poem is inconclusive on the subject, but the narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* explicitly notes that writing itself brings relief to mental suffering, albeit partially: 'Si je n'écris pas ce que j'ai vu je souffrirai autant – et peut-être un peu plus. Un peu seulement, j'y insiste. L'écriture ne soulage guère'.⁸³

In addition to shared imagery, similarities can also be observed between Houellebecq's poetry and prose from the perspective of technique. There is a visceral directness to the language of Houellebecq's poems as noted above which is equally true of Houellebecq's prose in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* which deploys direct, brutal, even crude, forms of expression. Brutality, as the narrator notes, is characteristic of life in contemporary society, he highlights: 'cette simplicité et cette brutalité

their place in what the author presents as a libidinal economy. This, again unperformed, mutilation can also be read as a direct response to the narrator's sexual alienation.

⁸¹ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 128.

⁸² Ibid., p. 141.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 14.

caractéristiques de la vie réelle'.⁸⁴ The novel seems to go further than the poems in this regard with women, in particular being the focus of derogatory comments. The narrator declares, for example, with reference to sex that 'ai-je toujours senti, chez les femmes qui m'ouvraient leurs organes, comme une légère réticence'.⁸⁵ Cruder still is the narrator's description of Catherine Lechardoy:

je le savais, elle avait tellement besoin d'être tranchée. Ce trou qu'elle avait au bas du ventre devait lui apparaître tellement inutile. Une bite, on peut toujours la sectionner; mais comment oublier la vacuité d'un vagin?

Possibly the most direct, and shocking, statement in the novel concerns his former partner Véronique and also engages the vocabulary of incision evoked above: 'quand j'y pense, je regrette de ne pas lui avoir tailladé les ovaires'.⁸⁶ Such statements are arguably appropriately viewed through the prism of the narrator's mental disturbance, yet this clearly does not reduce the impact of the lines.

There is another form of directness in Houellebecq's expression that is again related to his poetry. As noted above, the final sentences of Houellebecq's poems frequently feature abrupt, final, or impossible conclusions. This simple brutality is particularly identifiable at the end of paragraphs in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* in a similar way to the concluding stanzas of the poems considered above, a technique that also recalls the 'chutes pathétiques' observed by Evans within Houellebecq's poetry.⁸⁷ In addition to the bluntness of the visceral descriptions I have explored, it is mirrored in the form of broad, definitive conclusions or judgements the narrator makes about the world, or in the form of impertinent, or even darkly ironic, additions made to the conclusions or judgements of others. 'Pauvre Bernard' is dismissed as a 'fruit sec'.⁸⁸ A typical judgement closes a consideration of the 'effacement progressif des relations humaines':

⁸⁴ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 66.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 105.

⁸⁷ See above, pp. 86-87.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

Bien sûr on échange des numéros de téléphone, mais on se rappelle en général peu. Et même quand on se rappelle, et qu'on se revoit, la désillusion et le désenchantement prennent rapidement la place de l'enthousiasme initial. Croyez-moi, je connais la vie; tout cela est parfaitement verrouillé.⁸⁹

The narrator here introduces a similar degree of finality into his sociological assertion to that noted above in Houellebecq's poems. The reader is given no room for conflicting opinions as all potential space for dissent is closed down. This is enhanced by a movement towards the commanding use of the imperative and reinforced by the reflective pause suggested by the subsequent semicolon.

Assertions of a similar categorical certainty are frequent in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and the following examples all occur at the end of paragraphs: 'Avouer qu'on a perdu sa voiture, c'est pratiquement se rayer du corps social; décidément, arguons du vol',⁹⁰ 'Voilà, notre première journée à Rouen est terminée. Et je sais, avec la certitude de l'évidence, que les journées à venir seront rigoureusement identiques',⁹¹ and 'Je ne sais pas qui est le maire, mais il suffit de dix minutes de marche dans les rues de la vieille ville pour s'apercevoir qu'il est complètement incompetent ou corrompu'.⁹²

A similar definitiveness is also provided by statements that display critically sarcastic or ironic judgement on what has preceded it. When the single narrator is to be released from hospital following a heart problem he is informed that this will allow him to spend the festive period 'en famille', he sarcastically comments: 'L'aspect humaine n'a donc pas été oublié. C'est splendide', highlighting both his lack of 'famille' to spend Christmas with, as well as the assumptions made by the discourse of the hospital staff.⁹³ Elsewhere, the narrator is, again sarcastically, impressed by his line manager at work: 'Je discerne en lui un grand professionnel de la gestion des ressources humaines;

⁸⁹ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* p. 42.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 65.

⁹² Ibid., p. 68.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 38.

intérieurement, j'en roucoule. Il me paraît de plus en plus beau', a final ironic judgement that is so hyperbolic it undermines the praise of the previous lines.⁹⁴ When Tisserand suggests going for an after-dinner drink with the narrator in a 'café sympa', an experience the latter expects to find displeasing, he comments, sarcastically: 'À merveille'.⁹⁵

5a. Asyndetic juxtaposition

Descriptive passages of Houellebecq's prose are also frequently closed or juxtaposed with incongruous statements that also function as signs of distraction, defeatism or reminders of everyday reality.⁹⁶ Noguez highlights three such examples:

Il me fatigue un peu; je n'arrive pas vraiment à lui répondre. Sa moustache bouge.⁹⁷

Une fois, nous avons parlé civilisation. [...] En une métaphore empruntée à la mécanique des solides, il appelait ces choix des degrés de liberté. [...] La climatisation émettait un léger bourdonnement.⁹⁸

Je prononce quelques phrases sur les normes scandinaves et la commutation des réseaux; Schnäbele, sur la défensive, se replie sur sa chaise; je vais me chercher une crème caramel.⁹⁹

Noguez attributes these precise descriptions of banal details to illustrate what he has described as Houellebecq's 'rhétorique de la déprime'.¹⁰⁰ This is a valid reading and suggests that the lack of interest or distraction such statements imply is a reflection of the narrator's depressive perspective. It is, however, also possible to suggest, in a way that mirrors the impact of Houellebecq's poems considered above, that these final lines of Houellebecq's prose paragraphs should themselves be viewed in terms of the ambiguous effect they create.

⁹⁴ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 39.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁹⁶ In terms of technique, this echoes the 'caboteur poussif' of the poem 'Apaisement' considered above.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁰⁰ Noguez, *Houellebecq, en fait*, p. 109.

Noting such juxtapositions in his prose, Viard suggests that Houellebecq is ‘un maître de l’asyndète, c’est à dire de l’absence de transition’.¹⁰¹ Houellebecq’s writing makes frequent use of the rhetorical figure of the asyndeton, as these examples illustrate. Chris Holcomb and M. Jimmie Killingsworth describe the effect created by the figure and how it can introduce ‘ironic juxtapositions that invite readers into collaborative relationships with writers: because there are no explicit connections between phrases and clauses, readers must supply them to reconstruct the writer’s intent’.¹⁰² Such a definition is clearly pertinent with regards to Houellebecq’s fiction since it reflects both the frequent ambiguity of his writing, and how the reader is often implicated in the text as he attempts to provide a conclusive meaning, reducing the ambiguity of such statements.¹⁰³

Cohen’s work allows us to consider this effect from the perspective of poetic technique. Cohen suggests that prose frequently is separated from poetic language by virtue of a process he describes to as ‘coordination’. At the level of the sentence, prose depends on a certain level of grammatical correctness in order to produce a fully coherent and understandable sentence. More broadly, the notion of coordination is important throughout longer prose texts ensuring sentences and clauses sit together with a degree of logical coherence. The potential for poetic language to emerge arises when there is some degree of logical incoherence: ‘Nous appellerons “inconséquence” le type d’écart qui consiste à coordonner deux idées qui n’ont apparemment aucun rapport logique entre elles’.¹⁰⁴ These ‘inconséquences’, while irrelevant from the perspective of prose, possess a degree of poeticity, and can even possess the quality of the

¹⁰¹ Bruno Viard, *Les Tiroirs de Michel Houellebecq*, p. 34.

¹⁰² Chris Holcomb and M. Jimmie Killingsworth, *Performing Prose: The Study and Practice of Style in Composition* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), p. 115.

¹⁰³ The complexities of the reader’s engagement with the text will be considered in detail below in Chapter Three.

¹⁰⁴ Cohen, *Structure du langage poétique*, p. 161.

‘pathétique’; ‘L’unité perdu au niveau notionnel est récupérée sur le plan émotionnel, et c’est là le ressort profond de toute poésie’.¹⁰⁵

In this way, the asyndetic examples are more than signs of depressive understatement. Following Cohen’s notion of poetic ‘inconséquences’, they also create an ambiguous emotional effect in a similar way to the poems considered above. Notably, Houellebecq himself has suggested in interview that he favours such incongruity being read in this way, remarking of similar examples that: ‘Je préférerais que ceci soit vu comme la poésie’.¹⁰⁶ This is equally a quality of language noted by Houellebecq in his reading of Cohen where the incongruous use of language is described as ‘l’absurdité rendue créatrice: créatrice d’un sens autre, étrange mais immédiate, illimité, émotionnel’.¹⁰⁷ There are a number of emotional possibilities suggested by such a reading. Such statements could be seen, for example, to evoke of the profound boredom on the part of the narrator provoked by the discourse of the character: the moustache, the air conditioning and the crème caramel are all inherently more interesting than the conversation.

Such juxtaposition, itself a technique repeatedly located in Houellebecq’s poetry,¹⁰⁸ also clearly adds an absurd or comic quality to the narrator’s observations: there is no logical link between the moustache, the air conditioning, the crème caramel and the preceding clause or sentence, but the overall effect stresses the general absurdity of the workplace. This technique is also notable for the ambiguity of the mood it generates and how it creates what Martin Robitaille describes as ‘le sentiment d’étrangeté qui se dégage d’*Extension du domaine de la lutte*’.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Cohen, *Structure du langage poétique*, p. 168.

¹⁰⁶ Houellebecq, ‘C’est ainsi que je fabrique mes livres’, *La Nouvelle Revue française*, 548 (1999), pp. 197-209 (p. 199).

¹⁰⁷ Houellebecq, ‘L’Absurdité créatrice’, p. 81.

¹⁰⁸ Juxtaposition can also be observed more elsewhere in *La Poursuite du bonheur* when the poet asserts ‘Aujourd’hui c’est dimanche. Splendeur de Dieu, éclaté! / Je viens de m’acheter une poupée en plastique’ as religious worship is apparently juxtaposed with a sex toy. Houellebecq, *Poésies*, p. 123.

¹⁰⁹ Martin Robitaille, ‘Houellebecq, ou l’extension d’un monde étrange’, *Tangence*, 76 (2004), 87-103 (p. 88).

Juxtaposition reinforces such a mood throughout the text. A reference to ‘Sycomore’, a computer package for which the narrator is due to provide technical support, leads to an incongruous digression which considers ‘Le véritable sycomore’ (‘répandu au Canada’).¹¹⁰ This gives way to a consideration of the Pascal programming language and another digression to consider that ‘Pascal est un écrivain français du XVIIe siècle, auteur des célèbres “Pensées”’.¹¹¹ This slippage away from one precise signifier to another also results in a strange juxtaposition is again frequently characteristic of Houellebecq’s writing. This is a consistent movement towards precision, but one that results in strange juxtapositions that serve as repeated reminders of the absurdity of contemporary life.¹¹² In the novel’s opening scene, for example, a description of ‘deux filles’ focusses in on the very specific description that they ‘lisent des bouquins sur le développement du langage chez l’enfant’.¹¹³ Elsewhere, a description of the ‘immeubles lépreux du pont Cardinet’ becomes a caustic description of their inhabitants: ‘des retraités agonisant aux côtés de leur chat Poucette qui dévore la moitié de leur pension avec ses croquettes Friskies’.¹¹⁴

5. Houellebecq and bathos

Such interjections or shifts of focus towards precision are also appropriately described from the perspective of bathos. The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines rhetorical bathos as ‘ludicrous descent from the elevated to the commonplace in writing or speech; anticlimax’.¹¹⁵ This definition might immediately appear to be directly attributable to Houellebecq’s writing, which is eminently anticlimactic, but such a conception of

¹¹⁰ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 20.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² As noted in the introduction, Noguez has described Houellebecq’s work as ‘un immense “en fait”’ or a continual movement towards ‘un discours de vérité’. Noguez, *Houellebecq, en fait*, p. 150.

¹¹³ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 5.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 83.

¹¹⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary* online [accessed 28 March 2012].

bathos is, however, problematic.¹¹⁶ As Noguez observes, Houellebecq's style can be described in terms of its 'médian' qualities; it is only rarely elevated above the everyday. Equally, the major concern of Houellebecq's novels is, for the most part, the domain of the average, the everyday and, indeed, the commonplace.¹¹⁷ More precisely, the room for the narrative to 'descend' from or to is limited. Rather than bathos where writing descends into the banal, Houellebecq's texts frequently focus on a precise example within description or an acute example of the mundane from amongst the everyday: a moustache, the air conditioning or the 'crème caramel' in the examples considered above. In this way, the bathetic in Houellebecq's work sits uneasily within the *OED* definition since it draws attention to a typical example from amongst the mundane rather than suggesting a descent into it, ludicrous or otherwise.

However, Keston Sutherland suggests that bathos is a more complex term: 'this well-known definition from the *OED* [...] is simply wrong'.¹¹⁸ Sutherland makes a number of clarifications relating to its use and argues that bathos is less a descent than the 'destination', 'not sinking, but what is sunk to'.¹¹⁹ He stresses that writing is not naturally bathetic, bathos is a quality that is imposed on it by use and concludes that it does more than highlight incongruity or 'language imposed where it doesn't belong'.¹²⁰ It also has a critical role since: '[bathos] is not produced by the agency or the decay of language itself, nor by the original authors of the language nominated as bathetic [...], but by the satirist who first attackingly discovers to public view the ridiculous destitution of truth in that language'.¹²¹ In highlighting the bathetic, the writer exposes

¹¹⁶ *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, for example contains two moments of high tension that are not brought to a 'climatic' resolution; the scene where the narrator attempts to convince Tisserand to commit murder, and the very end of the novel, which sees the narrator lie down in a forest clearing rather than resolve his mental distress.

¹¹⁷ The workplaces, for example, of *Plateforme* and *Extension du domaine de la lutte*.

¹¹⁸ Keston Sutherland, 'What is Bathos?', in *On Bathos*, ed. by Sara Crangle and Peter Nicholls (London: Continuum, 2010) pp. 6-22 (p. 9).

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

discourse and holds it up for critical consideration or ridicule. The writer who frames the object or his writing in terms of bathos thus makes an implicit critical comment.

In this way, Houellebecq's highlighting of the bathetic is not only evidence of his narrator's depression or distraction, it is also a reflection of his observations of the 'destitution of truth'. The inclusion of what appear to be abrupt or initially irrelevant examples of the banal within examples of workplace discourse see that discourse consequently condemned in terms of its bathos. This can be described as a process of 'levelling'. The banal interjections thus encourage re-reading of the discourses they interrupt. The air conditioning noises present a critical comment about the characters' conversation about freedom within a connected age: they are both background noise. In a similar way, the moving moustache is a reduction of that character to his facial hair: for the narrator, his colleague's digressions on 'fric' and 'placements' are irrelevant.¹²² His moustache is thus a confirmation that 'Sa médiocrité est éprouvante'.¹²³

5a. Bathetic criticism

This process can be observed throughout *Extension du domaine de la lutte* where the narrator's frequent vomiting has a deflationary bathetic impact on the discourse that surrounds it.¹²⁴ The vomit is, by its nature, incongruous within the context in which it occurs, and forms a material contrast with the abstract ideals that the text considers, providing both an explicit rejection of them as well as an implicit criticism. The first example occurs in the opening pages of the text and concerns the discourses of feminism and psychoanalysis. The narrator, drunk at a party and lying on the floor overhears the 'platitudes' of the conversation between two women who discuss the right of a female colleague to wear a miniskirt to the office:

Pendant quinze minutes elles ont continué à aligner les platitudes. Et qu'elle

¹²² Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 18.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Such an effect comes alongside affect: disgust.

avait bien le droit de s'habiller comme elle voulait, et que ça n'avait rien à voir avec le désir de séduire les mecs, et que c'était juste pour se sentir bien dans sa peau, pour se plaire à elle-même, etc.¹²⁵

This is followed by the narrator falling asleep and having a bizarre dream filled with a series of strange symbols: 'La fille à la minijupe était dans l'embrasure d'une porte [...]. Sur ses épaules était perché un perroquet gigantesque, qui représentait le chef de service. De temps en temps elle lui caressait les plumes du ventre, d'une main négligente mais expert'.¹²⁶ On waking, the narrator reveals: 'je me suis rendu compte que j'avais vomi sur la moquette'.¹²⁷

This can, of course, be the natural result of heavy drinking, but can also be considered in the light of the discourses that precede it.¹²⁸ It is also notable that the narrator drinks throughout *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, although in relatively modest quantities which reinforces such a reading.¹²⁹ The vomiting is bathetic in that it is an intensely mundane and universal act and its interjection into the text forms a direct contrast with the clichéd feminist discourse of his work colleagues and can be read as an explicit critical comment on such discourse.¹³⁰ This comment can both be viewed from the perspective of disgust, in terms of vomit as the narrator's metaphorical expulsion of the feminist discourse, as well as the suggestion that the vomit, due to its textual proximity to the conversation is itself on the same level. The women are rehearsing well-worn abstract 'platitudes', the vomit thus forms a tangible, material contrast. This is similarly the case for the narrator's dream which can be read as a hyperbolic invitation to decode it through the discourse of psychoanalysis. This does not, however,

¹²⁵ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 6.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ An additional level of interpretation here is provided by McCann who describes the vomiting as a process of purification. John McCann, *Michel Houellebecq, Author of Our Times*, p. 15. In addition, Clément analyses this scene from the perspective of Kristevan abjection and suggests it has the potential to create a similar sensation on the part of the reader: 'le lecteur ressent ses crispations' and 'Les spasmes qui le secouent intérieurement le protègent et lui donnent la force de continuer sa lecture'. Murielle Lucie Clément, *Houellebecq, Sperme et sang*, p. 61.

¹²⁹ Here, for example, he drinks four glasses of vodka.

¹³⁰ Their discourse has already been discredited explicitly as 'Les ultimes résidus, consternants, de la chute du féminisme'. Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 6.

happen to any significant extent. Vomit is the only result. In this way, the narrator's vomiting implicitly anticipates the more explicit rejections of psychoanalysis that are to follow later in the text.¹³¹

Vomit plays a similar deflationary role on two additional occasions in the text. These examples are again inspired by alcohol but have a similar critical function as an expression of disgust and place the discourse that precedes them on the same level as the vomit itself. At another party, the narrator considers seducing Catherine Lechardoy, but the romantic ideal is again deflated by the material:

Après mon troisième verre j'ai failli lui proposer de partir ensemble, d'aller baiser dans un bureau; sur le bureau ou sur la moquette, peu importe; je me sentais prêt à accomplir les gestes nécessaires. Mais je me suis tu; et au fond je pense qu'elle n'aurait pas accepté; ou bien j'aurais d'abord dû enlacer sa taille, déclarer qu'elle était belle, frôler ses lèvres dans un tendre baiser. Décidément, il n'y avait pas d'issue. Je m'excusai brièvement, et je partis vomir dans les toilettes.¹³²

As Schuerewegen has suggested, this vomit can be read as a substitute for sexual ejaculation.¹³³ It is also a critical undermining of the romantic fallacies of the preceding lines. Both the narrator and Catherine are unattractive and sexually inactive. The vomit of the extract's final line serves as the rejection of the possibility of a sexual encounter with Catherine, but also draws attention to the bathetic qualities of the language in which it was imagined. The 'gestes nécessaires' of sexual activity as highlighted are thus exposed in terms of their impossibility and the narrator's vomit is a rejection of the

¹³¹ Later in the novel, the narrator declares that 'Une femme tombée entre les mains des psychanalystes devient définitivement impropre à tout usage, je l'ai maintes fois constaté. Ce phénomène ne doit pas être considéré comme un effet secondaire de la psychanalyse, mais bel et bien comme son but principal. Sous couvert de reconstruction du moi, les psychanalystes procèdent en réalité à une scandaleuse destruction de l'être humain. Innocence, générosité, pureté... tout cela est rapidement broyé entre leurs mains grossières. Les psychanalystes, grassement rémunérés, prétentieux et stupides, anéantissent définitivement chez leurs soi-disant patientes toute aptitude à l'amour, aussi bien mental que physique; ils se comportent en fait en véritables ennemis de l'humanité', *Ibid.*, p. 103. Contempt for psychoanalysis is a recurrent theme in Houellebecq's writing and has been considered by Cruickshank who asserts that 'Houellebecq negates any therapeutic potential of psychoanalysis', 'Sex, shopping and psychoanalysis: Houellebecq and therapy' in *Le Monde de Houellebecq*, pp. 199-212 (p. 200).

¹³² Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 47. Again, alcohol consumption is modest: three glasses of champagne.

¹³³ 'J'insisterai pour ma part sur la sorte d'interchangeabilité qui existe entre les deux formes excrétoires: chez Houellebecq, vomir ou éjaculer, cela revient en vérité au même; c'est que le phallus est ici comme un prolongement de l'œsophage'. Franc Schuerewegen, 'Scènes de cul', in *Michel Houellebecq*, ed. by Sabine van Wesemael, p. 97.

romantic nature of the language as it is a rejection of both the possibility and the desirability of the sexual encounter itself.¹³⁴

A final example of how vomiting suggests both rejection of and a commentary on discourse appears when the narrator visits a nightclub with Tisserand. A girl reminds the narrator of his ex-partner:

Jusqu'au visage, plein et candide, exprimant la calme séduction de la femme naturelle, sûre de sa beauté. La calme sérénité de la jeune pouliche, encore enjouée, prompte à essayer ses membres dans un galop rapide. La calme tranquillité d'Ève, amoureuse de sa propre nudité, se connaissant comme évidemment, éternellement désirable.¹³⁵

The narrator's response is again a mixture of disgust, also here tinged with the distinct desire to expel negative memories associated with his relationship, and what proves to be the deflation of the language of ideal perfection associated with femininity. Posited against the abstract ideal of the 'calme séduction de la femme naturelle' and 'la calme tranquillité d'Ève', the narrator heads to the toilets in search of a concrete physical experience: 'une fois enfermé j'ai mis deux doigts dans ma gorge'.¹³⁶ Again, both the physicality of the act of vomiting and the directness of the language form a direct contrast with the clichéd descriptions of femininity.

5b. Houellebecq and the semicolon

As the above analysis has demonstrated, Houellebecq's prose and poetry frequently, through techniques including asyndeton and juxtaposition, incorporate a degree of inconclusive incongruity. The semicolon frequently plays an important role in this process. Descriptions within Houellebecq's prose are particularly interesting when viewed from the perspective of Houellebecq's sustained use of this punctuation mark since they frequently introduce a degree of ambivalence to his texts. The novelist has

¹³⁴ It can also be read as an implicit criticism of consumerism since, as Sweeney notes: 'Incapable of participating in the carnival of consumption, the narrator is quite literally sickened by it'. Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair*, p. 74.

¹³⁵ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 113.

¹³⁶ Ibid. Again, the narrator claims to have drunk just two glasses of whisky at this point.

even suggested that his use of the mark is one of his literary achievements.¹³⁷ Noguez rightly observes that Houellebecq's use of the semicolon is widespread and, along with Descartes and Sainte-Beuve and asserts 'Michel Houellebecq fait plutôt partie des points-virgulistes de notre littérature'. Noguez attributes it to the novelist's desire for the expression of objective truth and stresses the 'rôle structurant et logique' the semicolon plays.¹³⁸ *Le Bon usage* stresses how the semicolon is used to order items within a list: 'pour séparer des éléments coordonnés d'une certaine étendue, surtout lorsqu'un de ces éléments au moins est déjà subdivisé par une ou des virgules', but also to 'unit des phrases grammaticalement complètes, mais logiquement associées'.¹³⁹

The semicolon does not only suggest order in Houellebecq's prose, it can frequently introduce Cohen's 'inconséquences', such as the 'crème caramel' example discussed above and can be considered in terms of the effect it introduces. Indeed, the nuanced use that Houellebecq makes of semicolons frequently obliges a reader to consider the nature of the logical associations between the two clauses. In such a way, the mark frequently introduces a degree of poetic and emotional ambiguity, as well as having a logical ordering function.¹⁴⁰ In this way, Houellebecq's semicolons often introduce uncertainty rather than logical precision in a manner that recalls his poems.

From the perspective of semicolons' 'rôle structurant et logique', a sentence such as 'Quand je me suis retourné, la plage était déserte; je n'avais même pas entendu la voiture démarrer' is a typical example.¹⁴¹ Here the logical relationship is clear: the second clause deepens the information provided by the first. Elsewhere, however, the

¹³⁷ Houellebecq said, perhaps not without a heavy dose of irony, that: 'J'ai progressivement maîtrisé des signes de ponctuation que je ne connaissais pas. D'abord le point-virgule; ça a été mon plus grand succès! Là, j'ai découvert les deux points', Didier Jacob, *Rebuts de presse - le blog de Didier Jacob*, May 25, 2011 <<http://didier-jacob.blogs.nouvelobs.com/archive/2011/05/25/houellebecq-a-les-idees-a-zero.html>> [accessed 2 October 2012] (para 3 of 4).

¹³⁸ Noguez, *Houellebecq, en fait*, p. 153.

¹³⁹ *Le Bon usage*, <<http://www.lebonusage.com/document/p1ch2-30989/1348066937094>> [accessed 19 September 2012].

¹⁴⁰ In interview, Houellebecq has explicitly referred to the 'poésie' that results from such juxtaposition. Houellebecq, 'C'est ainsi que je fabrique mes livres', p. 199.

¹⁴¹ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 121.

use of semicolons frequently has a more ambiguous effect that challenges the anticipated logical relationship between the clauses. For example: ‘Je regrettais que Tisserand n’ait pas tué le nègre; le jour se levait’.¹⁴² The narrator is disappointed that Tisserand could not be convinced to commit murder, the implication here could be that despite this, life continues (‘le jour se levait’), but this is not resolved since it also implies that the dawn is in some way dependent on the activity of the previous evening. Alternatively, the two events are held in a state of unsteady tension or asyndetic juxtaposition where no obvious relationship exists. The textual effect created by the logical discrepancy between the two clauses is one that clearly introduces an ambiguous poetic depth.¹⁴³

Elsewhere, the semicolon is used in a slightly different manner. Whereas it provides a degree of order and structure, this process deepens uncertainty in description rather than providing clear and definitive answers. For example: ‘Le lendemain je me suis levé tôt, je suis arrivé à l’heure pour le premier train; j’ai acheté un billet, j’ai attendu, et je ne suis pas parti; et je n’arrive pas à comprendre pourquoi’.¹⁴⁴ There is a clear progression from clause to clause here, but rather than offering greater precision and clarification about the narrator’s behaviour, the semicolons guide the reader towards the same kind of ignorance as the narrator. Like the narrator, the reader ‘n’arrive pas à comprendre pourquoi’ the former did not board the train. Houellebecq’s semicolons create a piling up of uncertainty and reflect the narrator’s confused mental state.

Houellebecq’s semicolon also frequently suggests a degree of emotional clarification. This emotionality often forms a contrast with the clause that precedes it, which frequently presents factual information. In this way, a semicolon is regularly

¹⁴² Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 123.

¹⁴³ A similar example which reinforces the latter reading can be found within *Les Particules élémentaires*: ‘[Michel] n’arrivait plus à se souvenir de sa dernière érection; il attendait l’orage’, p. 21. There is an absurdly comic quality to the description but also a significant degree of poetic ambiguity.

¹⁴⁴ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 72.

deployed to separate concrete description from the emotional effects of what is described. It is thus possible to see how the semicolons in Houellebecq's writing delimit the territory between the 'clinique' and the 'pathétique' within his work, increasing the text's emotional depth. There are three such examples in the following paragraph, a description of an unattractive girl:

Elle n'avait pas d'amies, ni évidemment d'amis; elle était donc parfaitement seule. Personne ne lui adressait la parole, même pour un exercice de physique; on préférait toujours s'adresser à quelqu'un d'autre. Elle venait en cours, puis elle rentrait chez elle; jamais je n'ai entendu dire que quelqu'un l'ait vue autrement qu'au lycée.¹⁴⁵

The first clause of all of these sentences introduces an objective, observable statement which is then qualified by a more subjective, emotional response. For example, in the first line above, her friendlessness is an observable fact, her being 'parfaitement seule' is more subjective. The second sentence, the fact that her fellow pupils ignored her is observable, the clause suggesting they preferred to speak with other students instead is again more subjective. In this way, while the post-semicolon clause may offer clarification, the clarification it provides is frequently in relation to thoughts, emotions or feelings rather than quantifiable facts, all of which invite the reader's emotional engagement. A similar example can be observed when the narrator stumbles on a visit to a nightclub bar:

Personne ne m'a relevé. Je voyais les jambes des danseurs qui s'agitaient au-dessus de moi; j'avais envie de les trancher à la hache. Les éclairages étaient d'une violence insoutenable; j'étais en enfer.¹⁴⁶

Again the former clauses are concerned with precision. The latter clauses express a subjective emotion. In the first sentence, the first clause is again presented as observable fact, followed by the narrator's emotional response post-semicolon. The second sentence is similar, but slightly more problematic since the distinction between the objective and the emotional is blurred, the objective description of the first clause is

¹⁴⁵ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 88.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

corrupted by the ‘insoutenable’ of the narrator. The final clause offers an entirely subjective response, however, about the narrator’s response to the lights, and the nightclub as a whole. A final example operates in a very similar way: ‘Week-end sans histoires; je dors beaucoup. Ça m’étonne d’avoir seulement trente ans; je me sens beaucoup plus vieux’.¹⁴⁷ The first sentence sees subjective response follow observable fact, whilst the second clause of the second sentence again encourages a deeper emotional response.

Houellebecq’s semicolons can also be considered in terms of the effect they have on Houellebecq’s work when read or spoken aloud. *Le Bon usage* stresses that the semicolon ‘marque une pause de moyenne durée’, which is effectively longer than that suggested by a comma, but shorter than a full stop. It is possible to suggest that there is an oral quality to Houellebecq’s semicolons that also reflects his poems, which similarly suggests the introduction of a ponderous pause in his writing. As in the previous example, the semicolons slow down the reading process, encourage contemplation and prepare the reader for the emotional clarification that is present in the second clauses of the two sentences.

Crowley’s consideration of Houellebecq’s use of the semicolon is notable since it considers how the punctuation mark plays a critical role within the author’s writing. In the context of his examination of how Houellebecq knowingly writes within the structure of contemporary literary production in the grip of ‘the relentless recuperation of the work as commodity’, Crowley posits Houellebecq’s semicolon as evidence of a ‘small cry of protest’.¹⁴⁸ Crowley argues Houellebecq’s use of the semicolon creates a degree of ‘ironic distance’ through a process of ‘flattening’ out or ironically framing the discourses of contemporary society rather than the narrator’s own thoughts. Crowley’s analysis is pertinent, but his examples, drawn from discourses of consumer advertising,

¹⁴⁷ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 132.

¹⁴⁸ Martin Crowley, ‘Low Resistance’, in *On Bathos*, ed. by Sara Crangle and Peter Nicholls (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 148-160 (p. 149).

management speak and car marketing, focus on social criticism, rather than the emotional dimension. I would therefore propose a reading of Houellebecq's semicolon that, as opposed to only 'flattening', conversely frequently creates a degree of emotional depth in his texts.

6. *Extension du domaine de la lutte's* poetic prose

Houellebecq's prose is often highly prosaic.¹⁴⁹ A sentence such as 'En me réveillant, je me suis rendu compte que j'avais vomi sur la moquette', for example, conveys little in the way of poetic ambiguity.¹⁵⁰ His writing, however, is consistently adorned with stylistic or lyrical traits. These flourishes alone are not extensive enough to warrant the description of Houellebecq's prose as completely poetic, but they certainly have characteristics that can clearly be described in terms of their poetic qualities. These range from relatively simple repetition to the use of more sophisticated poetic metre within his prose.

Poetic repetition abounds throughout *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. Cohen has noted that repetition has a poetic quality, and particularly that 'le langage répétitif est langage de l'émotion'.¹⁵¹ Houellebecq has also equated repetition in prose with redundancy in poetry in his consideration of Jean Cohen's work.¹⁵² Repetition is used elsewhere to evoke the unsteadiness of the narrator in his conversations with others: 'Ingénieur. Je suis ingénieur. Il faut que je dise quelque chose' where the repetition suggests the uncomfortable narrator needs to remind himself of his identity prior to engaging socially with others.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Sweeney, as noted above (p. 18), describes its 'non-literary' status.

¹⁵⁰ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 7.

¹⁵¹ Cohen, *Le Haut Langage*, p. 231

¹⁵² In his essay on Cohen, 'L'Absurdité créatrice', Houellebecq refers to 'la redondance, proscrite en prose sous le nom de répétition', p. 73.

¹⁵³ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 27

For Noguez, Houellebecq's use of repetition creates 'une autre façon de marquer l'insistance, notamment dans les jugements psychologiques'.¹⁵⁴ This technique also creates an unstable ironic effect. Noguez cites the following lines from *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, uttered by the narrator when he is suffering from chest pains, to illustrate Houellebecq's repetition: 'Je ne souhaitais surtout pas mourir à Rouen. Mourir à Rouen, au milieu des Rouennais, m'était même tout spécialement odieux'.¹⁵⁵ The repetition here reinforces the narrator's dislike of the city and its inhabitants, undermined slightly, perhaps by a degree of absurd generality. This is also an example of Houellebecq's ironic language. The repetition equally lends a lyrical quality to the words, particularly through the assonance of the long vowel sounds evoked in 'souhaiter', 'mourir', 'Rouen', 'tout', 'milieu' and 'odieux'. In this way, the irony functions rhetorically through the repetition of 'mourir à Rouen'. It adds a degree of hyperbolic lyricism to what could otherwise be a distinctly banal death of a man suffering from heart complications on a business trip, thus reinforcing the overall situational irony of the scene.

The deeper irony in this extract, that Noguez does not consider, is most fully appreciated in the light of the final words attributed to Jeanne d'Arc, herself burned at the stake in Rouen: 'Ah! Rouen! Rouen! Est-ce donc ici que je dois mourir?'.¹⁵⁶ There is an implicit intertextual relationship between the narrator's assertion and Jeanne d'Arc's utterance through both the repetition of 'Rouen', the notion of dying and the similar assonance of 'Rouen', 'mourir' and 'dois'. There is a clear irony in the situation of the narrator, a depressive IT support engineer, insignificant to the majority of other characters in the text, comparing himself to a French heroine. The overall effect, however, while ambiguous, is perhaps most correctly viewed from the perspective of

¹⁵⁴ Noguez, *Houellebecq, en fait*, p. 115.

¹⁵⁵ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 74.

¹⁵⁶ Pierre Adolphe Chéruel, *Histoire de Rouen sous la domination anglaise au quinzième siècle* (Rouen: Nicéas Periaux, 1840), p. 86.

the narrator's self-derision: the juxtaposition between himself and a figure of the status of Jeanne d'Arc serves to highlight the difference between the two, sharpening the focus on the narrator's lack of self-worth.

The lyricism in Houellebecq's novel is frequently more complex and often produces an imprecise tonality. Like his poems, lines in his prose can often be seen to adhere to the conventions of French poetic versification. This is often at odds with the object of the writing. Lines within his prose are regularly expressed in alexandrines, or near alexandrines. This can create a sense of harmony: 'Au café, les garçons et les filles se touchent', highlighting the 'gai' atmosphere of the café that Tisserand and the narrator are sitting in but alienated from.¹⁵⁷ A description of the narrator's arrival in La Roche-sur-Yon: 'la ville était silencieuse, calme; parfaitement calme', uses both repetition and a steady dodecasyllabic metre to accentuate his peaceful surroundings.¹⁵⁸

On other occasions, Houellebecq's fiction juxtaposes form and content in a similar way to his poetry as considered above. Whereas the form of his writing frequently draws close to classical metre, the content is mostly highly contemporary. On Houellebecq's poetry, Evans has noted that it is 'possible de retrouver le rythme dodécasyllabique, en deux hémistiches de six syllabes, en faisant un petit effort avec le redoutable "e" muet'.¹⁵⁹ Houellebecq's prose lines are rarely perfectly dodecasyllabic, and even more rarely perfect alexandrins, but their metre clearly resonates with French tradition, even if it does require the reader to make 'un petit effort' to identify the similarities.

The following line is striking from this perspective: 'Je mange une galette aux haricots rouges, et Jean-Pierre Buvet me parle de sexualité'.¹⁶⁰ This can be read as two lines of twelve syllables, separated by a comma, if the reader accentuates the 'e' at the

¹⁵⁷ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 64.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹⁵⁹ Evans, "'Et il y a un autre monde": reconstructions formelles dans les *Poésies* de Houellebecq' in *Le Monde de Houellebecq*, p. 22.

¹⁶⁰ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 31.

end of 'galette' and 'rouges' and reads 'sexualité' with four, rather than five syllables. The overall effect can again be described in terms of the 'étrangeté' noted by Robitaille, with a characteristic juxtaposition between the glimpse of the banal preoccupations of contemporary life expressed in classical metre, sarcastically highlighting the bathos of the situation.

The technique can also be observed elsewhere, where Houellebecq's lines are more conventionally dodecasyllabic. When the narrator attempts to entice Tisserand to murder, the reported speech is also notable: 'Lance-toi dès ce soir dans la carrière du meurtre; crois-moi, mon ami, c'est la seule chance qu'il te reste'.¹⁶¹ Again there is a striking juxtaposition between classical verse and contemporary murder, with the rhythm suggesting the narrator's vilanous enjoyment. A similar juxtaposition can be observed in a line recounting the narrator's heart problems: 'C'est le lendemain soir que je suis tombé malade'.¹⁶² The juxtaposition between poetic sensibility and the mundanity of life is also exemplified by the line: 'Après le départ de Tisserand, j'ai mal dormi; sans doute me suis-je masturbé'.¹⁶³ The first clause of the line prior to the characteristic alexandrine is dodecasyllabic, the second is octosyllabic, with the inversion of 'je' and 'suis' adding a degree of stylish poeticity to the line at odds with the narrator's unrefined beachfront masturbation.

Elsewhere in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, the poetic qualities of language are exploited over longer passages of prose. This is striking as the narrator is about to embark on journey to Rouen and the narrative is disrupted by a lengthy poetic description of scenery, apparently the eastern Arabian Sea. Bellanger insightfully describes this passage as a 'poème', 'moins employé comme métaphore précise que comme un réservoir de significations':¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 118.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 73.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 123.

¹⁶⁴ Bellanger, *Houellebecq, écrivain romantique*, p. 80.

Aux approches de la passe de Bab-el-Mandel, sous la surface équivoque et immuable de la mer, se dissimulent de grands récifs de corail, irrégulièrement espacés, qui représentent pour la navigation un danger réel. Ils ne sont guère perceptibles que par un affleurement rougeâtre, une teinte légèrement différente de l'eau. Et si le voyageur éphémère veut bien rappeler à sa mémoire l'extraordinaire densité de la population de requins qui caractérise cette portion de la mer Rouge (on atteint, si mes souvenirs sont exacts, près de deux mille requins au kilomètre carré), alors on comprendra qu'il éprouve un léger frisson, malgré la chaleur écrasante et presque irréelle qui fait vibrer l'air ambiant d'un bouillonnement visqueux, aux approches de la passe de Bab-el-Mandel.¹⁶⁵

This description, which continues into the following paragraph of the text before refocusing on the characters at Saint-Lazare train station, has a degree of poetic ambiguity in its redundancy within the overall narrative of the text. The language here also has a distinctly lyrical quality, in particular the repetition of the phrase: 'aux approches de la passe de Bab-el-Mandel'. Furthermore the description is incongruous within the context of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* as a whole from the perspective of setting since the entire novel is set within the frame of contemporary French experience, but also from the perspective of style. The descriptive prose with its deployment of adjectives such as 'équivoque', 'immutable', 'grands', 'rougeâtre' and 'extraordinaire', includes an unusual direct reference to the reader: and is evocative of a travel guide, rather than the narrative that has been established up to this point in the text, further estranging the mood of this section.

Noguez argues that this passage is a stylistic homage to the writing of Lautréamont.¹⁶⁶ Equally, the strange setting evoked here also has an implicit relationship with the fantastical and obscure landscapes evoked in the literature of H.P. Lovecraft as considered above. The Arabic sounds of 'Bab-el-Mandel' in particular echo the place names of Lovecraft's fiction, notably the fictional Arabian city of R'lyeh which serves as the hiding place for the horrific fantastical creature Cthulhu.¹⁶⁷ R'lyeh itself is described as having disappeared 'sunk beneath the waves; and the deep waters,

¹⁶⁵ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 51.

¹⁶⁶ 'Et à qui, de fait, sinon à l'auteur des *Chants de Maldoror*, est-il clairement rendu hommage dans l'étrange description du ciel aux abords de Bab-el-Mandel'. Noguez, *Houellebecq, en fait*, p. 104.

¹⁶⁷ As introduced in Lovecraft, 'The Call of Cthulhu'.

full of the one primal mystery through which not even thought can pass'.¹⁶⁸ Notably, the city of R'lyeh is discovered by chance by Johansen, Lovecraft's own 'voyageur éphémère', who inadvertently awakens the sleeping horror of Cthulhu.

This extract also prefigures the mental disorder that is to afflict the narrator in the novel's final pages. In the above extract, we are told of the immense danger, the 'grands récifs de corail, irrégulièrement espacés' which lie beneath the still surface of the water, visible only by their 'affleurement rougeâtre'. This danger that lurks in the depths beneath the surface is a metaphorical foreshadowing of the mental distress that will surge from the narrator's subconscious in the remainder of the text, disturbing the smooth surface of his personality.¹⁶⁹ In broad psychoanalytical terms, it is thus possible to understand both the 'récifs de corail' and Lovecraft's Cthulhu as representative of the narrator's id, having the potential to disturb the outward impression presented by the ego.

The 'affleurement rougeâtre' is also revealing since the colour red operates as an important visual motif throughout the text as a consistent link to depression, recalling the bloody suggestions of depressive self-harm in the novel and Houellebecq's poems. This use of red as an indication of mental distress is continued throughout the text, meaning the 'affleurement rougeâtre' is a consistent warning sign. On the subsequent train journey to Rouen, the narrator observes the countryside:

Je m'en autorise à jeter quelques regards sur le paysage. Le jour commence à se lever. Le soleil apparaît, rouge sang, terriblement rouge sur l'herbe d'un vert sombre, sur les étangs brumeux. De petites agglomérations fument au loin dans la vallée. Le spectacle est magnifique, un peu effrayant. Tisserand ne s'y intéresse pas.¹⁷⁰

The sun's red colour in the early morning is certainly a frequent natural phenomenon. It is also important to note that the hyper-acuity of the sense of sight can be associated

¹⁶⁸ Lovecraft, 'The Call of Cthulhu', p. 155.

¹⁶⁹ Bellanger equally notes how the passage foreshadows the dramatic remainder of the narrative. Bellanger, *Houellebecq, écrivain romantique*, p. 80.

¹⁷⁰ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 53

with the onset of depression, hence the sun's appearance is described with the exaggerated subjective adjectives, 'magnifique' and 'effrayant' as well as the adverb 'terriblement'.¹⁷¹ From a textual perspective, the 'rouge sang' of the sun is a mentonymic evocation of both the instances of self-harm in the text and the lurking danger of the 'récifs de corail' at Bab-el-Mandel. It is also noteworthy that the sun casts a red glow over the entire landscape, suggesting the narrator's broader depressive view of the world.

The technique is extended as the journey continues: 'Nous longeons la Seine, écarlate, complètement noyée dans les rayons du soleil levant - on croirait vraiment que le fleuve charrie du sang'.¹⁷² This image of a river transformed into a river of blood is here both a further sign that the narrator's vision has been distorted due to his depressive perspective and that this is in turn affecting his entire view of the world. Ewa Malgorzata Wierbowska suggests that the red sun reinforces the novel's 'atmosphère d'étrangeté' also noted by Robitaille, but I suggest it additionally reflects the narrator's mental state.¹⁷³ Arguably it is again also a reference to his thoughts of self-harm or suicide, reflecting the flow of blood resulting from a slashed vein, an action alluded to later in the text as well as in Houellebecq's poetry.¹⁷⁴ This vision of the Seine transformed into a river of blood, observed in the early morning is a reflection of an image presented in the poem 'Apaisement': 'Tout seul au point du jour – infinie solitude / La rivière charrie des monceaux de cadavres', again stressing parallels

¹⁷¹ The American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)* lists sensorial acuity as a being reported by patients suffering from a 'manic episode' which can be associated with a depressive episode. *DSM-IV*, p. 359.

¹⁷² Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 53.

¹⁷³ Ewa Malgorzata Wierbowska, 'La technique de la description chez Houellebecq – *Extension du domaine de la lutte*', in Murielle Lucie Clément & Sabine van Wesemael eds., *Michel Houellebecq à la une* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), p. 174. Wierbowska also here notes an interesting point of intertextual reference between the 'le fleuve charrie du sang' and a similar description made by Victor Hugo describing the aftermath of the slaughter of bohemian revolutionaries in *Notre-Dame de Paris*.

¹⁷⁴ 'Vous avez l'impression que vous pouvez vous rouler par terre, vous taillader les veines à coups de rasoir ou vous masturber dans le métro, personne n'y prêtera attention; personne ne fera un geste'. Houellebecq, *Extension de domaine de la lutte*, p. 99.

between the depressive voices of the poems and the fiction.¹⁷⁵

6a. The ambiguous ‘sentiment océanique’

The closing pages of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* provide additional evidence of how Houellebecq’s poetic sensibility can be mapped from his poetry to his prose. There are again thematic resonances here and, in particular, the experience described here resonates with the ‘sentiment océanique’ considered in the above introduction.

The end of the text relates how the narrator, who appears deep in depression, cycles deep into the forest of Mazas, where he believes he will have ‘une découverte essentielle’ or ‘une révélation d’un ordre ultime’.¹⁷⁶ The solitary poet’s journey towards hoped-for enlightenment clearly recalls the poet’s journey in the poems ‘Vocation Religieuse’ and ‘Passage’ considered above where he strives towards an inconclusive salvation.¹⁷⁷ Indeed, there is an oblique reference here to the roadside: ‘La surface en pente est grise, d’une panéité géométrique, absolue’,¹⁷⁸ which also implicitly recalls the landscape and atmosphere of ‘Passage’ where ‘Tout paraît recouvert d’asphalte et de bitume’.¹⁷⁹

The narrator’s initial optimism is clear:

Il fait merveilleusement beau, doux, printanier. La forêt de Mazas est très jolie, profondément rassurante aussi. C’est une vraie forêt de campagne. Il y a des petits chemins escarpés, des clairières, du soleil qui s’insinue partout. Les prairies sont couvertes de jonquilles. On est bien, on est heureux; il n’y a pas d’hommes. Quelque chose paraît possible, ici. On a l’impression d’être à un point de départ.¹⁸⁰

His optimism is reinforced through both form and content. Evans notes how there is often an unexpected note of optimism within Houellebecq’s poetry and that this

¹⁷⁵ Jacob Carlson has additionally noted an intertextual link in this image between *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and the following passage from Émile Zola’s *Germinal* as Mme Hennebeau and Négrel observe the approach of the mine’s starving employees: ‘À ce moment, le soleil se couchait, les derniers rayons d’une pourpre sombre ensanglantaient la plaine. Alors, la route sembla charrier du sang, les femmes, les hommes continuaient à galoper, saignants comme des bouchers en pleine tuerie’. Émile Zola, *Germinal* (Paris: Fasquelle, 2000), pp. 391-392.

¹⁷⁶ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 129.

¹⁷⁷ See p. 90 above.

¹⁷⁸ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 154.

¹⁷⁹ Houellebecq, *Poésies*, p. 189.

¹⁸⁰ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 155.

possibility of ‘un point de départ’, is frequently reflected in his prose.¹⁸¹ The appreciative description of idyllic nature here clearly suggests a hoped-for peace and harmony. This is reinforced by technique. The opening line of the extract: ‘Il fait merveilleusement beau, doux, printanier’ and the assertion, ‘On est bien, on est heureux; il n’y a pas d’hommes’ can both be read dodecasyllabically, reinforcing the narrator’s experience of a harmonious environment.

The text, however, reveals that ‘soudain tout disparaît’, and his experience takes a darker turn. There is a notable progression from the above ‘on est heureux’ to the similarly definitive ‘j’ai mal’:

Je m’allonge dans une prairie, au soleil. Et maintenant j’ai mal, allongé dans cette prairie, si douce, au milieu de ce paysage si amical, si rassurant. Tout ce qui aurait pu être source de participation, de plaisir, d’innocente harmonie sensorielle, est devenu source de souffrance et de malheur. En même temps je ressens, avec une impressionnante violence, la possibilité de la joie. Depuis des années je marche aux côtés d’un fantôme qui me ressemble, et qui vit dans un paradis théorique, en relation étroite avec le monde. J’ai longtemps cru qu’il m’appartenait de le rejoindre. C’est fini.¹⁸²

There is a bleak lyricism to these lines which contrasts with the previous extract and heightens the turn in the narrator’s attitude towards despair. The harmonious first line here is juxtaposed with the subsequent longer lines. The illusory happiness here evoked twice in harmonious groups of three: ‘si douce’, ‘si amical’ and ‘si rassurant’ and ‘de participation, de plaisir, d’innocente harmonie sensorielle’ contrasts with the subsequent dual and definitive ‘souffrance et [...] malheur’ and stresses the distance between the two states of being. Such contrasts reflect an awareness of the possibility of happiness but also its implausibility, reflecting the narrator’s vague assertion in *La Possibilité d’une île* that ‘J’étais, je n’étais plus’. All hope has been eliminated.

The narrator’s movement away from unselfconscious happiness is fully asserted in the final lines of the text:

Je suis au centre du gouffre. Je ressens ma peau comme une frontière, et le

¹⁸¹ Evans, “‘Et il y a un autre monde’: reconstructions formelles dans les *Poésies* de Houellebecq’.

¹⁸² Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, pp. 155-156.

monde extérieur comme un écrasement. L'impression de séparation est totale; je suis désormais prisonnier en moi-même. Elle n'aura pas lieu, la fusion sublime; le but de la vie est manqué. Il est deux heures de l'après-midi.¹⁸³

The final line of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* has strikingly similar qualities to those explored above. It suggests a temporal progression, but one it is far from clear whether the narrator will be able to follow since the self-harm suggested earlier in the text raises suicide as a possibility. The line also suggests a desperate attempt by the narrator to find an orientating marker within the world from his metaphorical position 'au centre du gouffre', but it is again unclear whether this will prove fruitful.

Here, the narrator is apparently in the grip of a deeply bleak depressive breakdown. An examination of poetic technique, however, reveals a hidden harmony to the description which increases the ambiguity of the overall effect. While he asserts 'Elle n'aura pas lieu, la fusion sublime', this assertion is destabilised by its decasyllabic harmony. Indeed, the line can be read from the perspective of poetry as two harmonious five syllable hemistichs, separated by a comma. Equally, as the narrator says 'L'impression de séparation est totale; je suis désormais prisonnier en moi-même',¹⁸⁴ the line can also be read as another example of dodecasyllabic metre. The narrator claims to have missed 'la fusion sublime', but a poetic reading of these lines implies that some kind of harmony has been attained. This suggests a tension between form and content that implies this might not actually be the case, deepening the overall ambivalence of the end of the novel.

7. Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how a shared sensibility exists between Houellebecq's earliest published poems and his first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. In practice, this can be observed in terms of the themes, images and techniques that resonate between the two texts. This approach to writing can be expressed, using

¹⁸³ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 156.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

Houellebecq's own critical terms as a 'méthode d'attaque brutale' which, in that it provides a direct affront to the reader, is similar to the stylistic approach he noted in the work of H.P. Lovecraft and, like the work of the American writer, also seems to be grounded in masochistic self-disgust. These techniques include the use of the semicolon to introduce a poetic dimension to Houellebecq's prose, asyndetic juxtaposition of descriptions, logical incongruities that add an element of bathetic criticism to his work as well as visceral images that resonate intertextually with those of Baudelaire's poetry. This chapter has also noted how the emotional impact of Houellebecq's texts is also heightened through the clinical properties of Houellebecq's language in both his poetry and his prose and demonstrated how the ambiguous 'sentiment océanique' highlighted in the introduction is also brought to bear in both bodies of work. Through a close reading of two significant, and typical, passages from *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, I have considered the 'poetic prose' of the novel which, as the subsequent analysis will reveal, can be located throughout Houellebecq's writing. The following chapter will extend the analysis conducted here and demonstrate how the techniques that appear to have their basis in Houellebecq's poetry can equally be located in his subsequent novels, mapping his poetic voice from poetry to prose.

Chapter two - The ‘poétique’ and the ‘pathétique’ in Houellebecq’s novels

1. Introduction

This chapter extends my consideration of the relationship between the style of Houellebecq’s poetry and his novels. It argues that although Houellebecq has produced a greater quantity of prose than formal poetry since the publication of *Les Particules élémentaires* in 1998, a distinct poetic sensibility persists in his work which can be mapped between these two forms of writing. Through a close critical reading of extracts from Houellebecq’s novels, drawn primarily from *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île*, this chapter will consider the formal and rhetorical strategies that Houellebecq’s writing uses to evoke and manage emotion in his readers. In this way, I demonstrate how the invocation of pathos is a characteristic feature of Houellebecq’s prose style. As noted in the above introduction,¹ Grass has described Houellebecq’s conception of poetry as a form of resistance to recuperation of literature by capitalist markets since it presents and describes an emotional, subjective or intuitive experience that is unique to poetic language. While Grass’ approach is largely theoretical, this chapter offers close textual readings to consider a stylistic continuity of poetry and poetic technique with Houellebecq’s prose and demonstrates how such poetic ‘resistance’ can be located in his work from the perspective of the techniques used to both evoke and reflect the ‘pathétique’ and thus how they impact the overall experience of reading his work.

As well as prose, Houellebecq’s fiction frequently includes passages of formal poetry within the narrative. Such ‘contamination’ of his prose has been critically considered from the perspective of literary history in the light of Houellebecq’s claim to be following the German romantic literary tradition’s commitment to producing a ‘total’

¹ See above, p. 21.

work of art.² This technique has a notable effect on the overall emotional texture of his work since prose is often juxtaposed alongside poetry.³ The distinctions between poetry and prose in Houellebecq's writing are, however, not always so distinct. It is often more appropriate to consider degrees of poetry and prose within Houellebecq's writing since it is only infrequently entirely prosaic or entirely poetic. As Cohen has noted, in a description that is pertinent with regards to Houellebecq's work, and implicitly references both Barthes' *Le Degré zero de l'écriture* and Jakobson's highlighting the prevalence of the 'emotive function' of language as discussed in the above introduction, this is a characteristic of writing:

les mots, même en usage prosaïque, ne sont jamais dépourvus de valeur pathétique. Poéticité et prosaïté ne sont que des caractères relatifs et tout ce que la théorie demande, c'est qu'il existe entre eux une différence d'intensité de ces valeurs, la prose tendant vers le degré zéro, la poésie vers le degré maximal.⁴

Rather than considering poetry or prose in isolation, this chapter will argue that it is equally appropriate to consider 'degrees' of the prosaic and the poetic within Houellebecq's writing.

This chapter will consider three stages of the poetic within Houellebecq's prose. I will firstly briefly consider the versified poems that the novels present. Secondly, this chapter will consider what I will describe as Houellebecq's 'poetic prose' and analyse textual examples drawn from *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d'une île*. As I shall demonstrate, even when the style of Houellebecq's novels is closer to prose

² Houellebecq has stated in interview that 'C'est une idée qui était chère au romantisme allemand, un héritage de Novalis. Dans le seul roman qu'il ait écrit et qu'il n'a pas achevé, *Henri d'Ofterdingen*, vous trouvez aussi bien de la poésie que des tartines zoologiques. Pour les romantiques, le roman était l'instrument le plus complet de l'art, l'œuvre par excellence, tous les genres devaient y intervenir. Je m'inscris dans cette filiation même si, comme Novalis, je me suis heurté à la difficulté d'intégrer la poésie au roman. Il y a des définitions, des commentaires scientifiques, des explications historiques, des descriptions mécanistes, des rêves, des dialogues, des paysages dans *Les Particules élémentaires*. Mais la poésie y trouve mal sa place alors qu'elle est essentielle'. Catherine Argand, 'Entretien: Michel Houellebecq,' *Lire*, September 1998, pp. 28-34, (p. 32). Grass also stresses 'l'affiliation critique qui existe entre la conception de la poésie et du roman chez Houellebecq et celle des préromantiques allemands'. Delphine Grass, 'Michel Houellebecq et les préromantiques allemands: une lecture poétique du roman houellebecquien' in *Michel Houellebecq à la une*, pp. 41-56 (p. 42).

³ This is notable in *Les Particules élémentaires* which incorporates poems authored by Bruno, Michel and another narrative source into the text.

⁴ Cohen, *Le Haut langage*, p. 192.

than it is to poetry, they retain the capacity to create a ‘pathétique’ effect. The section considers how Houellebecq’s prose makes consistent use of evocative visual images, particularly of worms and enucleated eyes, which have their origins in his poetry, as highlighted above. The final section of this chapter considers how Houellebecq’s prose is preoccupied by plot events that appear designed to evoke pathos and engage a reader emotionally. Here, I will highlight and describe the process by which the narrative restricts the descriptive language of emotionally charged scenes, which paradoxically increases their emotional impact.

2. Poetry within Houellebecq’s prose: *Les Particules élémentaires*

Versified poetry is located throughout Houellebecq’s novels and creates a range of emotional effects. This is notable in *Les Particules élémentaires* through the poems written by Bruno in a creative writing workshop at a New Age campsite which have a comic effect and reinforce characterisation by illustrating how the protagonist relates all his experience to his sexual desire.⁵ Elsewhere, poetry accentuates the emotional impact of plot events. This is the role of the poem written by Djerzinski as Annabelle lies dying following a suicide attempt.

This untitled poem is marked by a striking tonal shift that recalls the brutality of Houellebecq’s poetry as considered above. The tone is initially elegiac, describing Annabelle in terms of the naïve happiness frequently associated with childhood: ‘Elle était cette enfant faite pour le bonheur, / Tendait à qui voulait le trésor de son cœur’.⁶ This accentuates the suffering her death will bring about for both Djerzinski and her family. This suffering becomes more acute in the poem’s fourth stanza as the mournful tone is contrasted with the bleak immediacy of her death:

Maintenant tu es là,
Sur ton lit de mourante
Si calme dans ton coma

⁵ The poem ‘Je bronze ma queue’ serves to illustrate this. Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 138.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 354 [italics in original text].

Et à jamais aimante.⁷

There is a clear contrast here that enhances the impact of Annabelle's death. In the first stanza, she was described in terms of abstract emotions such as her 'bonheur' and her capacity for love. In this stanza, her dying body is both a material and immediate presence: 'maintenant', she is 'là', starkly on her 'lit de mourante'. This immediacy is reinforced by the shifts into present tense and from Annabelle's description in the third person to the second person. The word 'coma' is additionally notable since it has both a poetic quality, and a prosaic role. Its assonant vowel sounds resonate with the 'o' sounds in 'bonheur' and 'cœur' in the first stanza, but is also the medically pertinent term for Annabelle's state.⁸

The poem contained in the prologue to *Les Particules élémentaires* also introduces an ambiguous emotionality. In particular, it both describes and evokes the 'sentiment océanique' within Houellebecq's work as considered in the above introduction. The poem sits incongruously between the prose prologue and the first section of the narrative and appears to celebrate the emergence of the posthuman age brought about at the end of the text by Djerzinski's project. The poem's attitude to this project can, however, be read in two contrasting ways. Firstly, it appears to celebrate what Chiara Falangola has described as the 'bonheur et [...] la perfection du nouveau règne utopique, où des êtres androgynes, vivant dans l'entrelacement, ne connaissent ni le mal ni la séparation'.⁹ Secondly, it also presents a more ambivalent attitude to this 'nouveau règne'.

In one way, the poem suggests the utopic interconnectedness of all beings in a permanent state of bliss as identified by Falangola. The combination of both poetic and prosaic language can be read as an implicit or metaphorical evocation of such a happy

⁷ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 355 [italics in original text].

⁸ This poem also clearly recalls the poem 'Si calme dans son coma' published in the 1996 collection *Le Sens du combat*. This poem shares a similar theme, but is lacking the tonal contrast explored here that makes that included in the novel so distinctive and impactful. Houellebecq, *Poésies*, p. 56.

⁹ Chiara Falangola, 'Le Sentiment océanique', in *Michel Houellebecq à la une*, p. 314.

harmony through form. The poetic is here also invoked through metaphor to describing the interconnectedness which ‘Baigne nos corps / Dans un halo de joie’,¹⁰ and particularly how ‘la lumière autour de nos corps est devenue palpable’.¹¹ The poetic qualities, suggesting the ‘bonheur’ and ‘perfection’ identified in this poem by Falangola are reinforced by the poem’s rhyme scheme which makes steady use of end-of-line rhymes, which again are suggestive of a perfection or harmony of structure.¹² Such poetic language here seems to exist in a state of harmony with the less elegant and more prosaic ‘entrelacement des circonstances’ and, in particular, lines such as ‘Nous savons que nous serions rien sans l’entrelacement de douleur et de joie qui a constitué leur histoire’.¹³ Equally, the repetition of similarly prosaic phrases such as ‘Nous savons que’ and ‘Maintenant que’ here add to rather than detract from the rhythm of the poem.

This poem also belies a more ambiguous experience and implicitly undermines its own enthusiasm for the ‘nouveau règne’. Indeed, although the poem appears to herald a ‘tout nouveau règne’ of humanity,¹⁴ described in the prose preface as the ‘troisième mutation métaphysique’ of the race, its form implies nostalgia for an earlier age, pre-mutation. While, the poem can be read to suggest a subjective fusion that allows the individual subject to transcend their separation, the language and poetic conventions such as metaphor, rhyme and repetition used to express and evoke this fusion, are distinctly human and would, of course, have been established prior to the ‘mutation métaphysique’. The use of such poetic constraints perhaps already implies nostalgia for the markers and points of reference of human experience and thus suggests a longing for the human that the poem does not explicitly recognise.

¹⁰ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹² Such as ‘musique’/ ‘pratique’ and ‘noir’/ ‘histoire’/ ‘espoir’.

¹³ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

3. Houellebecq's pathetic prose

As well as this explicitly versified poetry within Houellebecq's novels, it frequently incorporates less classically formal examples of poetic writing into its narratives which make emotionally suggestive use of language. Such examples of 'poetic prose' are particularly striking within *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d'une île* and are neither entirely poetic nor entirely prosaic, but sit between Cohen's description of 'le degré zero' and 'le degré maximal' of the 'pathétique' as described above. Such passages are most notable for the sense of the 'pathétique' they bring to Houellebecq's writing.

The stylistic process at work here in Houellebecq's writing can certainly be described, using Cohen's concepts, as a fluctuation between prosaic language and emotionally suggestive poetic language. It can also pertinently be described with brief reference to Roman Jakobson's analysis of the 'bipolar structure of language', and his consideration of the relationship between the linguistic processes of metaphor and metonymy from the perspective of literary style.¹⁵ Jakobson observes that these two processes are normally operative within language and an individual writer 'exhibits his personal style' by giving preference to 'one of the two processes over the other'.¹⁶ Jakobson argues that the principle of metaphor, or similiarity, 'underlines poetry', whereas prose, particularly that of the Realist novel, is largely metonymic or 'forwarded essentially by contiguity'.¹⁷ Houellebecq's fiction is arguably most usually correctly described along the latter lines. The repeated metonymy of his writing is suggested by his position within the tradition of Western mimetic realism, as noted above and examples abound within his work. Sweeney, for example, suggests how the sex in Houellebecq's novels 'assumes a metonymic role' which represents 'all affective

¹⁵ Roman Jakobson, 'Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances', in Roman Jakobson, *On Language*, ed. by Linda Waugh and Monique Monville-Burston (New York: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 115-133 (131).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 130 & 129.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 132-133. Jakobson argues, for example, that 'the Realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time'. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

feeling and experience in a more general sense'.¹⁸ It is equally possible to observe an abundance of metonymic synecdoches, which use a specific example to represent a broader whole, throughout his work. The artwork of Jed Martin in *La Carte et le territoire*, which uses specific examples of working people to illustrate a broader 'fonctionnement de l'économie dans son ensemble', while his series of photographed Michelin maps present a series of metonymic views of contemporary France.¹⁹ Roger Célestin equally underlines 'le style non-métaphorique' of Houellebecq's prose.²⁰ It is, however, possible to suggest that the examples to be considered subsequently in this chapter complicate such readings of Houellebecq's style by introducing a degree of textual variation into his prose. Following Jakobson, it is possible to observe a movement away from the prosaic and metonymic and towards the more suggestive and metaphoric, or poetic, examples of his use of language.

This section provides a detailed analysis of three extracts from *Les Particules élémentaires* which display such a movement. The first two extracts will demonstrate how descriptions, often anchored in the prosaic, frequently can be read in terms of a process of imaginative or poetic 'flights' that temporarily move the text away from prosaic description in a way that again recalls Houellebecq's own observations of Lovecraft's literary style. The final extract demonstrates how a consideration of the phonic qualities of language within Houellebecq's prose can be read as further evidence of the poetic sensibility within his writing.

These examples demonstrate that a gradual movement away from the prosaic and towards the poetic is a characteristic quality of Houellebecq's fiction. Such fluctuation from the banal prosaic detail of the prose to the poetic recalls an observation

¹⁸ Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair*, p. 159.

¹⁹ Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 121. Further examples of Houellebecq's use of metonymy can be seen in the final line of *Les Particules élémentaires*, 'Ce livre est dédié à l'homme' (p. 394), his reductive description of a feminist to her clothing or 'pull-over', *Interventions 2* (p. 115) and, as will be considered below in the following chapter, the repeated insistence on Bruno's penis size which can be seen to serve as a synecdoche for his broader sexual failure.

²⁰ Roger Célestin, 'Du style, du plat, de Proust et de Houellebecq', in *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, pp. 345-356 (353).

that Houellebecq made concerning Lovecraft's literary style. Houellebecq noted that Lovecraft's style was characterised by the combination of prosaic detail, such as 'sa manière d'utiliser les concepts mathématiques, de préciser la topographie de chaque lieu de drame',²¹ which alternate with the fantastical, what Houellebecq terms 'les passages d'explosion stylistique'.²² A similar oscillation between registers of language can also be noted in Houellebecq's writing. These are frequently of a lower magnitude than the great stylistic shifts within Lovecraft's work, but the movement between modes of writing is clearly of a similar order and produces a comparable effect. Lovecraft's texts – as Houellebecq has noted – create a dramatic emotional effect, or 'fascination' on the part of the reader,²³ Houellebecq's writing equally uses this technique to introduce an emotionally suggestive edge to his language.

The first extract studied here provides a typical example since it demonstrates a deviation from the prosaic towards the poetic without entirely becoming formal poetry. It can be read as a realistic description of an aeroplane flight but it also functions metaphorically, presenting poetically-evoked 'flights' of imagination that are both anchored in, and remain restricted by prosaic language:

Il prenait le vol de 11h 50 à Shannon. L'avion survolait la mer, le soleil chauffait à blanc la surface des eaux; les vagues ressemblaient à des vers, qui s'enchevêtraient et se tordaient sur une distance énorme. En dessous de cette immense pellicule de vers, il le savait, des mollusques engendraient leur propre chair; des poissons aux dents fines dévoraient les mollusques, avant d'être dévorés par d'autres poissons plus massifs. Souvent il s'endormait, il faisait de mauvais rêves. Lorsqu'il s'éveillait, l'avion survolait la campagne. Dans son état de demi-sommeil, il s'étonnait de l'uniforme couleur des champs. Les champs étaient bruns, parfois verts, mais toujours ternes. La banlieue parisienne était grise. L'avion perdait de l'altitude, s'enfonçait avec lenteur, irrésistiblement attiré par cette vie, cette palpitation de millions de vies.²⁴

The extract opens with the distinctly prosaic, 'Il prenait le vol de 11h 50 à Shannon',

²¹ Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft*, p. 103.

²² 'On peut même dire que la construction, souvent subtile et élaborée, des "grands textes" lovecraftiens, n'a d'autre raison d'être que de préparer les passages d'explosion stylistique'. Ibid.

²³ 'Les écrits de HPL visent à un seul but: amener le lecteur à un état de fascination. Les seuls sentiments humains dont il veut entendre parler sont l'émerveillement et la peur'. Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft*, p. 58.

²⁴ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, pp. 364-365.

and has been preceded by a similarly mundane consideration of Djerzinski's property and recent financial history.²⁵ His aeroplane trip is marked by a distinct stylistic shift where description becomes increasingly evocative. The language does not venture fully into poetry to the extent we have seen in the above examples, 'survoler', for example, remains a prosaic verb to describe the motion of the plane, but it clearly becomes more poetically ambiguous. The analogous description of waves which 'ressemblaient à des vers' and the use of basic metaphor ('chauffer à blanc' is a commonly-used idiom to describe an increase in heat) by no means moves the text into the realm of complex poetry, but there is a clear progression from the functional opening sentence of the extract.

Poetic intensity increases in the next sentence. Analogy becomes metaphor as the waves are described visually as an 'immense pellicule de vers'.²⁶ This is followed by a description of the undersea lifecycle which, while prosaic in terms of language, strikingly juxtaposes images of the protagonist's plane flight and the undersea world in a manner that recalls the juxtaposition considered above in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*.²⁷ This brief description additionally operates as a reiteration of the Darwinian nature of animal life which recalls one of the text's thematic preoccupations. This descriptive passage equally pushes the narrative away from the reality of Djerzinski's everyday experience towards his half-asleep, and more poetic, observations of the countryside and suburban landscape.

The language here also displays a poetic sensitivity to rhythm. The description of undersea life, for example, continues the momentum established in the second sentence of the extract through the listing of nouns at the start of the line, repeated in the following clauses: 'l'avion', 'le soleil' and 'les vagues' are echoed by 'des mollusques'

²⁵ 'Il n'avait aucune intention de retourner en France, mais pendant les premières semaines il dut plusieurs fois se rendre à Paris pour s'occuper de la vente de son appartement, du transfert de ses comptes'. Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 364.

²⁶ These 'vers' will be discussed in detail on p. 139 below.

²⁷ See above, pp. 98-100.

and ‘les poissons’. The long assonant vowel sounds of all of these nouns enhance the lyricism of the passage. This is quickly curtailed with the finality of the line ‘Souvent il s’endormait, il faisait de mauvais rêves’ which flattens or cancels the preceding lyricism in another technique that recalls the deflationary ‘chutes pathétiques’ of Houellebecq’s poetry as considered in the previous chapter. The subsequent lines also suggest a similar movement from the poetic back to prose. The sentence ‘Les champs étaient bruns, parfois verts, mais toujours ternes’ suggests both a degree of colour reflected in a rhythm which is contrasted with the bleaker (both in terms of colour and rhythm), ‘La banlieue parisienne était grise’. At the start of the subsequent paragraph, the narrative reverts again to the more obviously prosaic, with the opening ‘À partir de la mi-octobre’, anchoring the text again in the prosaic of everyday experience.²⁸

This fluctuation between two forms of writing, between the suggestive poetic language and the prosaic is a very similar process to that observed above in the ‘brutality’ of Houellebecq’s poems. While not possessing the same degree of extreme finality as the line ‘Le rasoir dans mon bras trace un trait rectiligne’ considered in the previous chapter,²⁹ Djerzinski’s poetic ‘flight’ of imagination is curtailed within the narrative by subsequent prosaic language. In both examples considered above, this technique darkens the descriptions of Djerzinski’s imagination: observations about the life cycle of sea life are replaced by ‘mauvais rêves’. Equally here, the dark shades of colour of the landscape are replaced by the bleakly colourless Parisian suburbs.

3a. ‘Alternativement abrupte et douce’

A similar characteristic tension between prose and poetry, can be observed in the concluding passages of *Les Particules élémentaires*. The final pages include the detailed description of the ‘élaboration théorique’ of Djerzinski’s genetic plans, focalized

²⁸ Michel Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 365.

²⁹ See pp. 82-83 above.

through the perspective of his disciple Hubczejak.³⁰ In these passages, the language is precise, scientific in tone and intensely prosaic.³¹ Following the completion of Djerzinski's project, the prose takes a turn towards the poetic as the narrative refocalizes on him:

Il marchait longuement, sans but précis, sur la Sky Road, en de longues promenades rêveuses; il marchait dans la présence du ciel. La route de l'Ouest serpentait le long des collines, alternativement abrupte et douce. La mer scintillait, réfractait une lumière mobile sur les derniers îlots rocheux. Dérivant rapidement à l'horizon, les nuages formaient une masse lumineuse et confuse, d'une étrange présence matérielle. Il marchait longtemps, sans effort, le visage baigné d'une brume aquatique et légère. Ses travaux, il le savait, étaient terminés.³²

Both description and form here combine to suggest the protagonist's beatific happiness. Michel's long peaceful walk is evoked through the lyrical repetition of 'il marchait', echoed by the similar simplicity of the phrases 'la mer scintillait' and 'les nuages formaient une masse', which suggests harmony between Michel and the natural world. This is reinforced by the assonant vowel sounds of 'longue', 'longuement', 'longtemps' and 'le long des collines' in addition to 'reueuses', 'route', 'lumière', 'nuages' and 'brume' which suggest the protagonist's peaceful state of mind. This is also reinforced by the decasyllabic harmony of 'il marchait dans la présence du ciel' and the dodecasyllabic harmony of the final line of the extract: 'Ses travaux, il le savait, étaient terminés', a direct transposition of Houellebecq's control of versification from his poetry to his prose as considered in the previous chapter.

The description of the road followed by Djerzinski as 'alternativement abrupte et douce' is equally notable. In addition to a description of the terrain, it clearly also metaphorically suggests the 'ups and downs' of Djerzinski's life from childhood to

³⁰ Narrative focalization in Houellebecq's work will be considered in detail in the following chapter.

³¹ The following is typical of the prose associated with Hubczejak's perspective: 'Hubczejak note avec justesse que le plus grand mérite de Djerzinski n'est pas d'avoir su dépasser le concept de liberté individuelle (car ce concept était déjà largement dévalué à son époque, et chacun reconnaissait au moins tacitement qu'il ne pouvait servir de base à aucun progrès humain), mais d'avoir su, par le biais d'interprétations il est vrai un peu hasardeuses des postulats de la mécanique quantique, restaurer les conditions de possibilité de l'amour'. Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, pp. 376-377.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 377.

adulthood as described throughout the narrative. The description can also be seen to connote the fluctuations of Houellebecq's prose style and can be read as a *mise en abyme* of Houellebecq's literary technique. The adjective 'abrupt' here clearly describes the terrain but it can equally be seen to reflect the brusqueness, abruptness (or 'brutality' as considered above) of Houellebecq's prose which frequently provides a tonal contrast with the 'douce' qualities of Houellebecq's poetic writing as illustrated in the above extract.

3b. 'Nous pensons aujourd'hui que Michel Djerzinski est entré dans la mer'

The 'abrupte et douce' are also reconciled as qualities of language in the description of Djerzinski's disappearance as content and style of expression combine to create a distinct poetic effect. The overall vague sensation of the passage recalls the ending of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* considered above and again resonates with what Houellebecq has described as the 'sentiment océanique' within his work, both in terms of description and manner of evocation:

Nous pensons aujourd'hui que Michel Djerzinski a trouvé la mort en Irlande, là même où il avait choisi de vivre ses dernières années. Nous pensons également qu'une fois ses travaux achevés, se sentant dépourvu de toute attache humaine, il a choisi de mourir. De nombreux témoignages attestent sa fascination pour cette pointe extrême du monde occidental, constamment baignée d'une lumière mobile et douce, où il aimait à se promener, où, comme il l'écrit dans une de ses dernières notes, "le ciel, la lumière et l'eau se confondent". Nous pensons aujourd'hui que Michel Djerzinski est entré dans la mer.³³

While the opening of the extract again evokes of the language of scientific experimentation, 'nous pensons', 'De nombreux témoignages attestent', the language concurrently demonstrates a heightened poetic sensitivity. The location of Djerzinski's disappearance is, for example, 'constamment baignée d'une lumière mobile et douce', again suggested by lengthened vowel sounds, the lyrical qualities of which sit harmoniously here with the quasi-scientific language. Indeed, this is reinforced through

³³ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 379.

Djerzinski's harmoniously dodecasyllabic written words, 'le ciel, la lumière et l'eau se confondent'. The closing sentence is particularly interesting since it ends the main body of the text with a similar degree of abruptness to that considered above within Houellebecq's poems. It concludes with the simultaneously definitive and ambiguous 'Nous pensons aujourd'hui que Michel Djerzinski est entré dans la mer'. This appears to suggest Michel's suicide, but the overall meaning is somewhat more ambivalent and less direct than 'nous pensons que Djerzinski s'est noyé', for example. The fact that Djerzinski is anticipated to have 'entré dans la mer' is naturally more ambiguously suggestive, however, than just a description of death. It concurrently suggests fusion, the materiality of the human body merging with the fluid water here reinforced by the fusion between prose and poetic language.

The final line of the text highlights 'mer' as its final word, which also encourages an additional reading of this extract that further underlines Houellebecq's poetic sensitivity to language. In her consideration of the role of water imagery in Houellebecq's fiction and its relationship to poetic fusion within his writing, Falangola notes the phonic similarities between 'mer' and 'mère' (both can be expressed in phonetic notation by /mɛr/). Falangola argues that through his consistent use of water imagery: 'Houellebecq est fidèle à un sentiment humain primitif, que l'on pourrait nommer *régression au ventre maternel*'.³⁴ This is an important observation, and one that allows us to propose an alternative reading of this passage from *Les Particules élémentaires*. Motherhood is a key theme of the novel, with the extent to which Janine's lack of interest in her children Michel and Bruno forming a key strand in the text's narrative. While Bruno holds her responsible for his social alienation, as demonstrated by an outburst as he visits her on her deathbed, Michel is more conciliatory on the subject.³⁵ Given the 'mère'/'mer' resonance it is possible to suggest the assertion that

³⁴ Falangola, 'Le Sentiment océanique', p. 312 [italics in original text].

³⁵ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, pp. 319-320.

Michel has ‘entré dans la mer’ in the above extract can be read as an implication that, at the moment of his death, Michel has achieved a degree of reconciliation with his mother, crucially unstated explicitly by the text.³⁶

4. *La Possibilité d'une île* and decomposition

La Possibilité d'une île equally makes a consistent use of poetic prose as a consideration of three extracts from the novel demonstrates. In this section I will firstly consider the text's prologue which can be read in terms of its explicit attempt to emotionally engage the reader. Secondly, I will consider an extract which contrasts with the poetic ‘flights’ observed in the previous section and demonstrate what I will describe as a darker decomposition of language towards the poetic. Finally, this section considers the text's epilogue which, can be read metaphorically as an interrogation of both poetry and prose as modes of experience and reflects the qualities Houellebecq has associated with both forms of writing as discussed in the above introduction.

The first pages of *La Possibilité d'une île* form a prologue that sits unsteadily between poetry and prose, directly implicating the reader in the narrative and creating an emotionally destabilising effect. This prologue is composed of fragments of versified poetry, testimony from the novel's posthuman protagonists and direct invocations of the reader alongside what appear to be descriptions of film scenes. These fragments are juxtaposed rather than forming coherent ideas, narrative development or an identifiable narrative voice.³⁷ The ambiguity is deepened by the dedication to journalist Harriet Wolff which sits on the page subsequent to what appears to be the text's dedication proper. It is thus never specified if the dedication and prologue are to be attributed to the

³⁶ There is another Baudelairean precedent to Houellebecq's work in this regard, which strengthens the links between the two writers as discussed above. Viard notes how Baudelaire had a complex relationship with his own mother and suggested how his work is ‘hanté par le rêve océanique d'une réintégration fusionnelle’. He highlights the line ‘La mer, la vaste mer, console nos labeurs!’ in Baudelaire's ‘Moesta et errabunda’ and speculates: ‘Qui ne voit que cette *vaste mer* qui gronde et qui berce tour à tour est aussi une *vaste mère*?’ Viard, *Les Tiroirs de Michel Houellebecq*, p. 144 [italics in original text].

³⁷ Evans notes a ‘mélange de registres’ here, noting in particular a ‘prose poétique [qui] fait echo à la musique harmonieuse d'alexandrin’. David Evans, “‘Et il y a un autre monde’: reconstructions formelles dans les *Poésies* de Houellebecq’, p. 37.

author or to a voice from within the narrative, such as protagonist Daniell whose own encounters with female journalists the text recounts. Maud Granger Remy considers this section of the novel in terms of narrative perspective and highlighted its ‘ambiguïté’. In particular she has noted a destabilising effect on the reader she has attributed to the ‘collusion récurrente entre réel et fiction entretenue volontairement par Houellebecq’.³⁸

The text’s opening can be read in terms of how it directly engages the emotions of the reader who, is addressed directly. This is initially amicable on the first page of the novel: ‘Soyez les bienvenus dans la vie éternelle, mes amis’.³⁹ Later, the terms of address appear more confrontational, ‘Qui, parmi vous, mérite la vie éternelle?’,⁴⁰ and even more intimidating, ‘ Craignez ma parole’,⁴¹ which Agathe Novak-Lechevalier describes as establishing ‘un contrat de lecture initial fondé sur la terreur’.⁴² A direct narrative desire for the reader’s emotional complicity with the text is then articulated:

Je ne souhaite pas vous tenir en dehors de ce livre; vous êtes, vivants ou morts des *lecteurs*.
Cela ce fait en dehors de moi; et je souhaite que cela se fasse – ainsi, dans le silence.⁴³

The act of reading, which will prove crucial to the narrative of *La Possibilité d’une île* since the posthuman narrators of the text are themselves engaged in a consistent process of reading and commentating the written *récit* of Daniell’s life, is here foregrounded as a process that depends upon the reader’s emotional engagement. Indeed, the novel here establishes a contract with its reader that suggests how it should be read: a text is thus not only to be appreciated aesthetically, ‘en dehors’.⁴⁴

³⁸ Maud Granger Remy, ‘*La Possibilité d’une île* ou “Le Livre des Daniel”’, *Michel Houellebecq à la une*, pp. 221-231 (p. 227).

³⁹ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d’une île*, p. 9.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴² Agathe Novak-Lechevalier, ‘Michel Houellebecq: le pathétique en lisière’, *L’Unité de l’œuvre de Michel Houellebecq*, ed. by Bruno Viard and Sabine van Wesemael (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014), pp. 67-80 (p. 78).

⁴³ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d’une île*, p. 15 [italics in original text].

⁴⁴ A note of irony can be viewed in these lines. As Chapter Three of the present work demonstrates, the figure of the author is explicitly not ‘en dehors’ of the text.

These opening pages of *La Possibilité d'une île* also evoke the reader's emotions through direct provocation. When the text was published in 2005, Houellebecq already had a degree of media notoriety for the misogynistic or racist ideas contained in his previous texts which sparked various degrees of emotional responses from his readers.⁴⁵ It is thus possible to read the overtly sexual, and anti-female, remarks that are presented in the opening pages of the text as an explicit evocation of such an idea of the author as well as deliberate, even cynical, provocations with the aim of producing a direct emotional response. The narrator, for example, a cloned descendent of Daniell, speculates about the positions of women and dogs within human society: 'Il est possible qu'à une époque antérieure les femmes se soient trouvées dans une situation comparable – proche de celle de l'animal domestique' due to a shared 'forme de bonheur domotique' between the two.⁴⁶ On the following page, a vagina is described as 'un trou à nains tombé en désuétude',⁴⁷ which is followed by Marie22's poem, '*Je suis seule comme une conne / Avec mon / Con.*'⁴⁸ As considered above, a narrative voice appears to invite a reader to engage with the text but concurrently, statements such as these can be read as a deliberate attempt to repel or challenge a reader with their misogyny and crude sexualised language, above all establishing a reader's emotional engagement with the text.

Other examples within *La Possibilité d'une île* display a similar sensitivity to the texture of language to that highlighted here. This is noticeable in the final section of the text attributed to Daniell which, in a similar way to the examples considered in the previous section, opens with prosaic language which becomes increasingly and suggestively poetic as the section progresses. The initial sentence of the section initially

⁴⁵ The text was published after *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *Les Particules élémentaires* which saw the author accused of misogyny and his 2002 trial for 'injure raciale et incitation à la haine religieuse' following the publication of *Plateforme*.

⁴⁶ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 11.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 12.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 13.

appears to be relatively unpoetic or prosaic: ‘Nous sommes en septembre, les derniers vacanciers vont repartir; avec eux les derniers seins, les dernières touffes; les derniers micro-mondes accessibles’.⁴⁹ The ‘micro-mondes accessibles’ suggests a more profound desire for communication with the parting women than the sexualised ‘seins’ and ‘touffes’ indicate. The section continues in an increasingly suggestive manner and the language takes a darker turn to reflect Daniell’s mental distress. Rather than a flight towards the poetic as noted above, it is perhaps more accurate here to describe a ‘decomposition’ towards the poetic to reflect the character’s depressive state of mind rather than the optimism of Michel in the earlier text.⁵⁰

Since the departure of Esther, Daniell has been in a state of depression, this is evoked here through what he describes as fear. This fear is poetically paradoxical in that it is both tangible and abstract:

Il y a toutefois quelque chose, quelque chose d’affreux, qui flotte dans l’espace, et semble vouloir s’approcher. Avant toute tristesse, avant tout chagrin ou tout manque nettement définissable, il y a autre chose, qui pourrait s’appeler la *terreur pure de l’espace*.⁵¹

The fear evoked here as ‘quelque chose [...] qui flotte’ again explicitly recalls the poem ‘Derniers Temps’ considered in the previous chapter, where fear is equally tangible and personified as ‘la peur qui me suit sans parler’.⁵² As this passage progresses, and Daniell approaches suicide, the language decomposes away from precise prose and towards the suggestively poetic:

Je ne sens plus de haine en moi, plus rien à quoi m’accrocher, plus de repère ni d’indice; la peur est là, vérité de toutes choses, en tout égale au monde observable. Il n’y a plus de monde réel, de monde senti, de monde humain, je suis sorti du temps, je n’ai plus de passé ni d’avenir, je n’ai plus de tristesse ni de projet, de nostalgie, d’abandon ni d’espérance; il n’y a plus que la peur.⁵³

The ‘repères’ and ‘indices’ that have disappeared from Daniell’s experience include

⁴⁹ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d’une île*, p. 427.

⁵⁰ My choice of this term seems appropriate given the Baudelairean resonances noted in the previous chapter. See pp. 77-82 above.

⁵¹ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d’une île*, p. 13.

⁵² Houellebecq, *Poésies*, p. 160

⁵³ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d’une île*, p. 427.

those that make prose possible, only the poetry of raw emotion or the ‘intuition pure de l’instant’, considered above, prevails.⁵⁴ The close of the extract, and Daniell’s final written words again directly recall Houellebecq’s earliest poetry:

L’espace vient, s’approche et cherche à me dévorer. Il y a un petit bruit au centre de la pièce. Les fantômes sont là, ils constituent l’espace, ils m’entourent. Ils se nourrissent des yeux crevés des hommes.⁵⁵

This horrific image of the narrator on his own in a room, under attack from these metaphorical ‘fantômes’ that act as symbols of his despair is evocative of the fantastical, other-worldly climate evoked in the poem ‘Vocation Religieuse’ with ‘l’homme sans paupières’ as discussed in the previous chapter, but also the poet’s isolation as suggested in ‘La Fêlure’. The ghastly image of ghosts which, ‘se nourrissent des yeux crevés des hommes’ makes use of an image which also directly evokes Houellebecq’s poetry.⁵⁶ In his final moments, Daniell cannot orientate himself in relation to his experience, he feels: ‘plus rien à quoi m’accrocher, plus de repère ni d’indice’.⁵⁷ This sensation is also reflected in the formal qualities of Houellebecq’s language, which is here unstructured and itself equally without ‘repère ni d’indice’ of poetic metre. This description of what Daniell experiences as a subjective dissolution can again be seen to resonate with the ‘sentiment océanique’ as evoked in the closing passages of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *Les Particules élémentaires* in the imprecise fates of the protagonists. Here, however, the experience described is more conclusive. There is no trace of optimism; the bleakness of the narrator’s experience clearly foreshadows his suicide.

4a. The epilogue – an allegorical journey

The epilogue of *La Possibilité d’une île* is also interesting when considered from the perspective of poetic language since it implicitly explores the relationship between

⁵⁴ See p. 56 above.

⁵⁵ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d’une île*, p. 428.

⁵⁶ This image in Houellebecq’s prose will be considered in detail in the following section.

⁵⁷ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d’une île*, p. 427.

poetry and prose. Here Houellebecq interrogates exactly the same relationship between these two modes of experience as between ‘compréhension’ and ‘poésie’ in his early essay ‘Renoncer à l’intelligence’. In this way, the epilogue operates as an allegorical exploration of the tension between poetic and prosaic modes of experience. The clone who leaves his isolated enclosure in the final pages of the does so to experience emotion and to come into contact with the experience of the ‘pathétique’ that his own reading, vicariously experiencing Daniell’s life through studying his *récit*, has not enabled him to do. In his enclosure, his life is perhaps most appropriately described as ‘prosaic’: his desire has been neutralised, his existence reduced to an emotionless functional monotony, expressed as his ‘routine solitaire, uniquement entrecoupée d’échanges intellectuels’.⁵⁸ This contrasts with what he reads in Daniel’s written testimony: ‘J’en étais venu sur la fin à envier la destinée de Daniell, son parcours contradictoire et violent, les passions amoureuses qui l’avaient agité - quelles qu’aient pu être ses souffrances, et sa fin tragique au bout du compte’.⁵⁹

In this way, Daniel25’s principal reason for leaving the isolation of his secure compound and his journey through what remains of a post-apocalyptic Europe can be understood as a search for real experience and emotion rather than the ‘échanges intellectuels’ he has hitherto been limited to. His journey can be read as a quest for authentic emotional experience. Most importantly, the clone wants to experience love:

Malgré ma lecture attentive de la narration de Daniell je n’avais toujours pas totalement compris ce que les hommes entendaient par *l’amour*, je n’avais pas saisi l’intégralité des sens multiples, contradictoires qu’ils donnaient à ce terme.⁶⁰

Despite some glimpses of emotion, the clone remains unable to fully experience a stirring emotional experience of the kind he has read in Daniell’s testimony. The following extract is typical:

⁵⁸ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d’une île*, p. 439.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 440.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 449 [italics in original text].

L'aube se leva, humide, sur le paysage de forêts, et vinrent avec elle des rêves de douceur, que je ne parvins pas à comprendre. Vinrent les larmes, aussi, dont le contact salé me parut bien étrange. Ensuite apparut le soleil, et avec lui les insectes; je commençai, alors, à comprendre ce qu'avait été la vie des hommes.⁶¹

The clone claims to have a growing understanding of human life, yet this is limited to the intellectual recognition of natural phenomena. He remains unable to fully experience them emotionally. This is reflected in the simple description in this extract; there is no poetic evocation, for example, of the beauty of dawn. The clone also feels the gentle stirrings of nostalgia at what used to be a café:

Installé à la terrasse d'un ancien café-restaurant qui dominait la surface turquoise de la retenue d'eau, au milieu des tables et des chaises métalliques rongées par la rouille, je me surpris une fois de plus à être saisi par un accès de nostalgie en songeant aux fêtes, aux banquets, aux réunions de famille qui devaient se dérouler là bien des siècles auparavant.⁶²

Again, the language remains prosaic and any emotionality is undermined by the character's inescapable rationality. The intellectual arguments he has been transferred by his clone predecessors precludes empathy: 'J'étais pourtant, et plus que jamais, conscient que l'humanité *ne méritait pas* de vivre, que la disparition de cette espèce ne pouvait, à tous points de vue, qu'être considérée comme une bonne nouvelle'.⁶³

The one genuine emotional experience the clone undergoes, the death of his dog Fox, is similarly undermined. His emotion remains restrained by the rational prose of the narration. The clone is not able to fully recognise and experience emotion. He notes his physical response, but cannot fully recognise or embrace it: 'Mes jambes fléchirent sous moi, je tombai agenouillé devant le cadavre encore tiède de mon petit compagnon'.⁶⁴ Again, the clone's emotional response is evoked in simple unambiguous language, only the familiar 'mon petit compagnon' conveys a slight emotionality or affection. Any glimpse of emotion is quickly replaced by the logic of scientific

⁶¹ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 441.

⁶² Ibid, p. 445.

⁶³ Ibid. [italics in original text].

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 467.

reasoning that comes instinctively to him. Fox is dead and therefore, he must decompose: repulsive material reality triumphs over emotion. This is evoked in a description that is again implicitly reminiscent of Baudelaire's 'Une Charogne': 'Je contemplai longuement, très longuement, le corps mutilé de Fox; puis les mouches arrivèrent, en petit nombre'.⁶⁵

Despite these suggestions that the clone will never experience the 'poetry' of real emotional experience, the final lines of the text belie an implicit optimism when considered from the perspective of form. This is the same process as observed in the previous chapter in the final lines of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, and above with reference to *Les Particules élémentaires*. Like the narrator in the earlier text, the clone here reclines in the sunshine and reflects:

Le bonheur n'était pas un horizon possible. Le monde avait trahi. Mon corps m'appartenait pour un bref laps de temps; je n'atteindrais jamais l'objectif assigné. Le futur était vide; il était la montagne. Mes rêves étaient peuplés de présences émotives. J'étais, je n'étais plus. La vie était réelle.⁶⁶

There appears to be a resignation here that suggests the clone will bleakly see out the remainder of his life, devoid of 'bonheur'. Evans, however, notes that these lines make use of poetic technique and has described 'une prose où résonnent discrètement les derniers alexandrins [du] récit' since the extract can be read as a succession of six syllable hemistiches.⁶⁷ As in the final lines of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, the form here suggests a greater degree of optimism than the clone himself recognises. While the clone does not experience any outright happiness, the steady dodecasyllabic metre suggests his appreciation of 'présences émotives'.⁶⁸ The clone will never have a

⁶⁵ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 467.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 485.

⁶⁷ Evans, "'Et il y a un autre monde": reconstructions formelles dans les *Poésies* de Houellebecq', p. 38.

⁶⁸ There is possibly another important intertextual link between these endings of Houellebecq's texts and the work of English writer J.G. Ballard, who Houellebecq has briefly referred to in his critical writing. This warrants closer examination than will be provided in the present study. The clone's decision to recline in shallow water, the narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*'s similarly vague gesture at the end of the text and Djerzinski's apparent suicide in *Les Particules élémentaires* all recall the protagonist of Ballard's 1961 short story 'The Overloaded Man' who, in what appears to be a result of his own

full appreciation of human emotionality, but the rhythm of these lines implies, at least, a degree of poetic sensitivity and, in turn, a slight appreciation of the emotional experience that he does not explicitly recognise.

5. Poetic images in Houellebecq's prose

As well as this fusion of poetry with Houellebecq's prose, there is also a continuity between these two forms of writing through the shared images that are located in both bodies of work, further demonstrating the persistence of Houellebecq's poetic sensibility. This section considers two strikingly recurrent, evocative and symbolically-charged images that have I have so far noted in Houellebecq's poetry: images of worms and gouged or damaged eyes. The gruesome images of worms and eyes in particular can be read as an extension of the 'brutality' of Houellebecq's fiction considered in the previous chapter. As well as their gruesome, or shocking role within Houellebecq's work and their capacity to share authorial 'souffrance' with the reader as highlighted above as a preoccupation of his work, they also consistently resonate with, and propagate, the themes of his writing.

5a. Worms, larvae and flies

The first prose extract from *Les Particules élémentaires* considered above contains a notable description of the sea: 'les vagues ressemblaient à des vers, qui s'enchevêtraient et se tordaient sur une distance énorme'.⁶⁹ This can, of course, be read as a description of waves as seen from an aeroplane, but equally as an extension of a metaphor first used in Houellebecq's earliest poetry to suggest mental distress. This technique can be located repeatedly throughout Houellebecq's work. The poem 'Apaisement' considered

disaffection with the contemporary world, similarly reclines in his garden pond: 'Slowly he felt the puttylike mass of his body dissolving, its temperature growing cooler and less oppressive. Looking out through the surface of the water six inches above his face, he watched the blue disc of the sky, cloudless and undisturbed, expanding to fill his consciousness. At last he had found the perfect background, the only possible field of ideation, an absolute continuum of existence uncontaminated by material excrescences'. J. G. Ballard, 'The Overloaded Man', in *The Complete Short Stories: Volume 1* (London: Fourth Estate, 2011), pp. 330-344 (pp. 343-344). For Houellebecq on Ballard, see Houellebecq, 'Sortir du XX^e siècle' in *Interventions 2*, p. 226.

⁶⁹ See p. 129 above.

in the previous chapter similarly describes ‘vers’ which the poet senses under his skin, suggesting how his mental anguish is experienced physically.⁷⁰ The waves, described using a similar vocabulary also associate a similar anguish with Djerzinski who is consistently described as depressive.⁷¹ It is notable, however, that these ‘vers’ are external to the protagonist rather than felt as an interior sensation as in ‘Apaisement’. This suggests a projection of his internal suffering onto the outside world, or equally as suggestive of Michel’s disgust with or contempt for it rather than exclusively an interior self-loathing.

Another striking example of a similar order, again associated with Djerzinski, can be observed within *Les Particules élémentaires*. On returning home he discovers the dead body of his pet canary and disposes of it in his building’s waste disposal system. Djerzinski speculates about what will happen to the bird’s cadaver:

il rêva de poubelles gigantesques, remplies de filtres à café, de raviolis en sauce et d’organes sexuels tranchés. Des vers géants, aussi gros que l’oiseau, armés de becs, attaquaient son cadavre. Ils arrachaient ses pattes, déchiquetaient ses intestins, crevaient ses globes oculaires.⁷²

Such speculation clearly stylistically resembles the poetic ‘flights’ of Djerzinski’s imagination as considered in the previous section in terms of their poetic departures from mundane description as well as Houellebecq’s consistent use of juxtaposition as considered above. The ‘vers géants’ of this extract can be read alongside the previous example as a projection of Djerzinski’s mental despair. In this way the bird, in terms of its pathetic death and subsequent disposal, becomes an avatar for the protagonist and his own inescapable submission to both the consumer and sexual economies of

⁷⁰ Notably, Houellebecq uses exactly the same image to that described in ‘Apaisement’ to suggest the anxiety associated with depression in his later fiction. In an extract from *La Possibilité d’une île*, the depressed Daniell, describes his symptoms using language that again suggest delusional parasitosis related to depression: ‘vers quatre heures du matin je me réveillai à nouveau, avec l’impression que des milliers de vers couraient sous ma peau, et l’envie presque irrésistible de me déchirer jusqu’au sang’. Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d’une île*, p. 137.

⁷¹ The text recounts a period where ‘Michel demeura couché deux semaines entières [...]’. Pendant plusieurs jours, il contempla le radiateur situé à gauche de son lit’. Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 202.

⁷² Ibid., pp. 20-21.

contemporary society, as suggested by the presence of waste consumer products and ‘organes sexuels tranchés’. Anxiety thus becomes the symptom of these phenomena for Djerzinski, confirmed by his subsequent response of taking antidepressant drugs.⁷³

The technique can also be located within *La Carte et le territoire*. Here the image appears more obliquely, but a consideration within the context of the previous two examples justifies a reading that again reads the use of ‘vers’ as a symbol of depression. Jasselin, considers the death of his dog, Michel, who was the victim of a parasitic ‘heartworm’ infection:

La dirofilariose est une maladie parasitaire; le parasite est un nématode qui se loge dans le ventricule droit du cœur et dans l’artère pulmonaire. Les symptômes sont une plus grande fatigabilité, puis une toux, et des troubles cardiaques qui peuvent provoquer secondairement des syncopes. Le traitement n’est pas sans risques: plusieurs dizaines de vers, dont certains atteignent trente centimètres, coexistent parfois dans le cœur du chien.⁷⁴

This extract can clearly be read in terms of how it develops Jasselin’s character, demonstrating the affection he had for this animal and his subsequent grief at its death. It also allows the text to stress Jasselin’s preference for a pet dog over raising children, a dislike of whom is another recurrent preoccupation of Houellebecq’s work.⁷⁵ Given both the prevalence of ‘vers’ in Houellebecq’s work and the fact the dog described above has the peculiar name Michel (unusual as the name of a dog and striking as the name of the author), within a text that already has at least one explicit avatar for the author, this legitimises an additional metaphorical reading of this extract. In such a way, the canine Michel becomes another avatar for the author alongside the character ‘Michel Houellebecq’, also present in the text. Houellebecq is afflicted by depression in the text and this is mirrored by the dog’s worm infestation, itself a further symbol of

⁷³ ‘Il avala trois Xanax’, Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 21.

⁷⁴ Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 301.

⁷⁵ In *La Possibilité d’une île*, Daniell remarks, for example ‘Le jour du suicide de mon fils, je me suis fait des œufs à la tomate [...]. Je n’avais jamais aimé cet enfant: il était aussi bête que sa mère, et aussi méchant que son père. Sa disparition était loin d’être une catastrophe; des êtres humains de ce genre, on peut s’en passer’, pp. 29-30.

authorial depression: the worm eating away at his heart.⁷⁶

The association of canine infestation with human experience is also a reminder that man is frequently presented primarily as a member of the animal species within Houellebecq's writing. Indeed, this is also consistently stressed in Houellebecq's work through the use of flies, larvae and parasites, all of which are semantically related to worms and also serve as consistent reminders of human mortality within his fiction. Notably, this is stressed in *Les Particules élémentaires* as the narrative recalls Djerzinski's childhood experiences watching the nature television programme *La Vie des animaux*. This programme stresses the Darwinian cruelty of nature but also acts as a reminder of animal mortality. After outbursts of aggression, the animals 'replongeaient dans un sommeil stupide, uniquement animé par les attaques des parasites qui les dévoraient de l'intérieur. Certains parasites étaient eux-mêmes attaqués par des parasites plus petits; ces derniers étaient à leur tour un terrain de reproduction pour les virus'.⁷⁷

Again, this technique can be observed throughout all of Houellebecq's texts, displaying that death and decay is inevitable for humans as well as their animal counterparts. Indeed, the author has noted the entropic nature of his writing: 'S'il y a une idée [...] qui traverse tous mes romans, jusqu'à la hantise parfois, c'est bien celle de l'irréversibilité absolue de tout processus de dégradation, une fois entamé'.⁷⁸ This is highlighted by recurrent images of decomposition. The dog Fox is the victim of 'une tique' in *La Possibilité d'une île*, gruesomely extracted by the posthuman narrator, before he eventually dies, attracting a swarm of flies.⁷⁹ Human mortality is consistently highlighted by the process of decomposition brought about by larvae and flies as

⁷⁶ Such a reading would be reinforced by understanding Djerzinski in *Les Particules élémentaires* and Daniel1 in *La Possibilité d'une île* as avatars for the author himself. The complex issue of authorial identification within Houellebecq's writing will be considered in more detail in the following chapter.

⁷⁷ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 47.

⁷⁸ Houellebecq and Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Ennemis Publics* (Paris: Flammarion/Grasset, 2008), pp. 118-119.

⁷⁹ 'Fox gémit faiblement, mais resta immobile au moment où j'opérais: lentement, millimètre par millimètre, je parvins à extraire l'animal de sa chair; c'était un cylindre gris, charnu, d'aspect répugnant, qui avait grossi en se gorgeant de son sang; ainsi était constitué le monde naturel'. Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 442.

stressed in descriptions of Bruno's dead grandfather in *Les Particules élémentaires*,⁸⁰ Fox's death and the decay of Houellebecq's corpse in *La Carte et le territoire*.⁸¹ Notably, Houellebecq's will specifies a desire to be buried, rather than cremated: 'Je souhaite que les vers dégagent mon squelette', in what can be read as another implicit reference to Baudelaire's 'Une Charogne', suggesting the author himself views himself as inseparable from the same Darwinian logic as his characters.⁸²

5b. The eye

The previous section of this chapter has considered an important extract from *La Possibilité d'une île* where Daniell, in the grip of despair, describes feeling at the mercy of the physical threat provided by ghostly figures who he anticipates intend to pull out and devour his eyes. Horrific visual images of deliberately damaged or enucleated eyeballs are another consistent motif of Houellebecq's poetry and prose and represent a point of extreme violence within his work. As in this example, the symbol is consistently used to connote acute suffering.

As Martin Jay demonstrates in his consideration of the role of the visual within modern French culture, the eye is a crucial figure. More precisely, Jay has identified an 'antiocularcentric discourse' within twentieth-century French writing which displays a 'hostility to visual primacy' and demonstrated how work by writers including Georges Bataille and Guy Debord has been marked by such a tendency.⁸³ This has often, such as in the former's *Histoire de l'œil* (1928) or Luis Buñuel's short film *Un Chien andalou* (1929), been dramatized by a violence towards the image of the eye, or the metonymic play of literary signifiers associated with the image.⁸⁴ Houellebecq's own antiocularism is not, then, without artistic precedent. My analysis of enucleation in his writing

⁸⁰ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 51.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 467; Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 275.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 317.

⁸³ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes* (London: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 589 & 14.

⁸⁴ For an example of the latter see: Roland Barthes, 'La Métaphore de l'œil', *Critique*, 195-196 (1963), p. 770-777.

considers it primarily as a symbol of violence, both that perpetrated on his characters in his texts as well as its potential to evoke a repulsed emotional response on the part of the reader. Jay considers Linda Williams' argument that Buñuel's film is 'an attempt to subvert the dominant regime of cinematic pleasure'.⁸⁵ I suggest that the brutality of such images within Houellebecq's writing is of a similar order in that they have an equivalent capacity to disturb the pleasure of the reading experience.

The eye is an important visual image for Houellebecq and is frequently used to suggest character traits. His prose frequently uses images of wide-open eyes to suggest sexual attractiveness, child-like innocence or honest communication.⁸⁶ Equally, closed eyes frequently accompany a character's sexual bliss or suggest other forms of happiness.⁸⁷ Morrey notes that scenes of satisfying sex in *Les Particules élémentaires* are marked by a 'suspension of visibility'.⁸⁸ The damaged, gouged eye or hollowed-out eye socket is also a particularly striking and recurrent symbol within Houellebecq's work. More precisely, the horrific image, arguably the most repulsive within his fiction, forms an example of an extreme point of suffering. This motif is used to represent both a self-hatred, where the figure of the poet is the target of his own violence and strikingly within his fiction as a symptom of a violent society. In the poem 'Il est vingt et une heures', considered above, it is suggested that the poet is at risk of 'crever [son] œil droit'. In a later poem, 'Vu d'un compartiment de train' from the 1999 collection

⁸⁵ Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, pp. 258-259.

⁸⁶ For example, in a screenplay idea conceived by Michel in *Plateforme* which describes the ill-fated love affair between a young American man and a Thai prostitute, the naivety of the former is underlined by 'ses beaux yeux bleu clair', Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, p. 116. Elsewhere in *Plateforme*, Valérie's attractiveness is frequently described in terms of 'les yeux brillants', p. 203. In *La Possibilité d'une île*, Esther is immediately striking to Daniell because of her 'jolis yeux bruns', p. 178. In their first meeting, their relationship is established through eye contact: 'à partir du moment où elle leva les yeux vers moi il ne fut plus question de libre arbitre, nous étions déjà dans l'étant donné', p. 177 [italics in original text]. For example of direct, honest communication, when Jed Martin's father admits he is planning on ending his life through assisted suicide in *La Carte et le territoire*: 'Il se touna vers son fils, le regarda droit dans les yeux', p. 342.

⁸⁷ 'Valérie ouvrit la bouche, ferma les yeux au moment où les lèvres de Bérénice s'approchaient des siennes; elle s'abandonna totalement au baiser', Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, p. 63. 'Elle avança les lèvres, dégagea le gland à petits coups de langue. Je fermai les yeux, je fus parcouru d'un vertige, j'eus l'impression que j'allais venir dans sa bouche', *Ibid*, p. 124. At a moment of contentment in *La Carte et le territoire*: '[Jed] ferma les yeux avec bonheur', p. 31.

⁸⁸ Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, p. 15.

Renaissance, the motif is similarly used to suggest the poet's self-loathing tinged with a misogynistic suspicion of others, here anticipating how a woman he encounters on a train would like to harm him: 'Je suis sûr qu'elle m'arracherait les yeux avec plaisir'.⁸⁹

This symbol strikingly recurs throughout all of Houellebecq's novels. As discussed in the previous chapter, it is present in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* through the narrator's desire to plunge scissors into his eyes.⁹⁰ Most notably, the symbol is also used to enhance the backdrop of societal violence: an eye gouging is frequently a symbol of violence perpetuated on the weak by the strong in Houellebecq's work. Elsewhere in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, a student protester has 'l'œil crevé' in a peaceful protest 'mal tourné'.⁹¹ This motif is deployed to particularly gruesome ends in *Les Particules élémentaires* where Bruno relates to Christiane the story of how David di Meola, the son of a hippy guru and disaffected rock star, has turned to murder and the production of snuff videos. The anecdote functions within the novel as a further illustration of one of the novel's major themes, namely how the 1960s dreams of liberty and freedom have been superseded by the acute individualism Houellebecq holds then responsible for. This is doubly, and brutally, reinforced by the example provided by the Di Meola case. Christiane also recounts how, at the funeral of David's father, she was forced to watch his body burning on a funeral pyre, marking both the death of his utopic dream and heralding the sinister events to follow: '[il m'a forcée] à regarder ce qui restait du corps. On voyait le crâne avec ses orbites'.⁹² This is developed later by a description of a scene from one of David's horrific snuff movies where he is seen to

⁸⁹ Houellebecq, *Poésies*, p. 213. Similar images of ocular violence can be located in the poem 'Différenciation Rue d'Avron' from *Le Sens du combat*, Ibid., p. 23, where a voice, apparently a lover asserts 'la mort / Ne prendra pas mes yeux comme ceux de mon frère', which seems drawn from a personal anecdote. The poem 'Où est mon corps subtil?' from *La Poursuite du bonheur*, p. 123, again uses the eyes to suggest the poet's suffering: 'Je vois des yeux crevés qui glissent sur les murs'. Given the importance of sex and sexuality to Houellebecq's writing, as considered in the introduction, a Freudian reading of ocular violence within his work is also possible, but this will not be provided in detail here. As Jay notes, *Downcast Eyes*, p. 332, Freud has linked enucleation with castration (with reference to the Oedipus myth and his consideration of blindness in E.T.A Hoffman's story 'The Sandman').

⁹⁰ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 143.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 61.

⁹² Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, pp. 253-254.

dismember a baby in front of its grandmother, both key symbols of innocence in Houellebecq's work, before he 'arrachait un œil à la vieille femme avec ses doigts avant de se masturber dans son orbite sanglante'.⁹³

In *Plateforme*, the damaged eye again accentuates violence. As noted in the previous chapter, it is an important element of descriptions of injuries in the climactic terrorist attack. The image also appears at the beginning of the novel in the description of the murder of Michel's father: 'Le visage de mon père avait en outré été frotte sur le sol, pratiquement jusqu'à faire jaillir l'œil de l'orbite'.⁹⁴ Later in the text the image is again used in the same way. When Michel recognises Lionel, who he first encountered on his Thai holiday, in Paris, it accentuates his status as victim: 'Un gros disque de coton recouvrait son œil droit. Il avait eu un accident du travail, quelque chose avait explosé; mais ça allait', the description stressing the brutality of the society he inhabits.⁹⁵

The gouged eye is also similarly prevalent in *La Possibilité d'une île*. At the start of the text, the narrator recounts an anecdote concerning an argument between two hotel guests: 'J'ai cru un instant qu'il allait planter sa fourchette dans les yeux de l'octogénaire'.⁹⁶ This example foreshadows the novel's epilogue which presents a similarly violent picture of human behaviour. Here the clone comes across a brutal battle between two primitive human males which the narrator understands as 'un rite de union, un moyen de resserrer les liens du groupe'.⁹⁷ It is a savage, bloody battle and one of the combatants receives a dagger blow to the eye before he is set upon and his remains eaten by the other members of the tribe. His head, however is left to one side: 'La tête gisait de côté, intacte hormis son œil crevé'.⁹⁸ Reading Daniell's final words in

⁹³ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 255.

⁹⁴ Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, p. 28.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

⁹⁶ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 20.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 463.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

the light of these two occurrences of ‘œil crevé’ within the text enables us to read the extract in an additional way. Rather than being exclusively a result of Esther’s departure, Daniell’s depression and suicide can be seen a response to human brutality, the vicious Darwinian survival of the fittest at the heart of human experience.

Equally, the image can be located within *La Carte et le territoire*. As with the worms considered above, the symbol is again presented obliquely. The image appears in Jed Martin’s destruction of his painting ‘Damien Hirst et Jeff Koons se partageant le marché de l’art’: ‘Il saisit un couteau à palette, creva l’œil de Damien Hirst, élargit l’ouverture avec effort – c’était une toile en fibres de lin serrées, très résistante’.⁹⁹ This violent gesture can be read as an explicit intertextual reference to the prevalence of the image within Houellebecq’s fiction. It can additionally be read as a symbolic gesture, and attack on what Hirst represents in the art world. Later in the narrative, for example, Martin observes that the growing value of Hirst’s work is attributable to ‘La valeur marchande de la souffrance et de la mort était devenue supérieure à celle du plaisir et du sexe’, and his attack can be understood as a reaction against such a market development.¹⁰⁰

The eye, both as a symbol of honest communication and a focus of repulsive violence, is thus a crucial figure in Houellebecq’s poetry and prose. Its importance within the context of Houellebecq’s poetics can also be developed with reference to psychopathologist Simon Baron-Cohen’s work on theory of mind since it provides a useful discussion of the essential role played by the eye in the communicative act. In his consideration of what he describes as ‘mindblindness’, Baron-Cohen demonstrates how patients suffering from autism often lack an ability to empathise with other people or develop what he describes as ‘the capacity to imagine or represent states of mind that

⁹⁹ Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 30.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 371.

we or others might hold'.¹⁰¹ A key element of the process of building empathy here is the role played by eye contact between humans which, according to Baron-Cohen, permits an individual to build a 'theory' of another's thoughts and intentions: 'mind-reading' based on an understanding of 'the language of the eyes'.¹⁰²

In the light of such a process, it is possible to consider the role played by the important symbolic role played by eyes in Houellebecq's writing. As noted above, eye contact is a crucial sign of an altruistic or sexually-loving relationship in his fiction. The recurrent image of the damaged or gouged eye, however, can be read in terms of how it hampers communication and is a frequent indicator of an emotionally, rather than just ocularly, damaged individual. The poetic voice which threatens to 'crever [son] œil droit', this accentuates its alienation and posits the potential of blindness as a nihilistic and definitive rejection of the society that has rejected it. It is also notable that when Michel of *Plateforme* reencounters the lonely Lionel, as mentioned above, his industrial eye injury accentuates the pathetic nature of Lionel's situation since he lacks the fundamental ability to empathise or fully communicate – 'il n'avait aucune personnalité' – as well as heightening the sense of pathos felt by Michel, who subsequently convinces Valérie to arrange for a complimentary trip to Thailand for him in a moment of tender charitability.

6. Houellebecq's 'refrains typiques'

Houellebecq additionally creates 'pathétique' instances within his writing through moments of high plot drama. The author has suggested that this is one of the effects he strives to create through his writing, asserting: 'J'avoue que j'aime bien quand les gens me disent qu'ils ont pleuré à mes livres'.¹⁰³ To this end, his fiction makes consistent use of pathetic 'set pieces', or what Agathe Novak-Lechevalier has described as 'refrains

¹⁰¹ Simon Baron-Cohen, *Mindblindness* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997), p. 2.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 114.

¹⁰³ Houellebecq, 'En toutes lettres', *Les Inrockuptibles Hors série Houellebecq*, p. 13.

typiques'.¹⁰⁴ A survey of such 'refrains' will be followed by my close reading of a selection of typical examples from *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d'une île* to explore their complexity. In particular, I consider here how their impact is enhanced by the economy of their expression.

Houellebecq's five novels consistently describe plot events that seem designed to evoke pathos and most frequently seems to relate to the 'souffrance' suggested by 'Rester vivant', which Houellebecq has stressed should be shared with the reader as noted above. An overview of Houellebecq's novels reveals that Novak-Lechevalier is correct to describe such a preoccupation as 'le cœur de son univers'.¹⁰⁵ Houellebecq has made an observation about the work of singer-songwriter Neil Young, that here appears appropriate as a description of the subject matter of his own writing in this context: 'Il faut être un très grand artiste pour avoir le courage d'être sentimental, pour aller jusqu'au risque de la mièvrerie'.¹⁰⁶ These 'set pieces' or 'refrains' are widespread throughout Houellebecq's writing and they can be broadly grouped together in three sections: descriptions of characters' childhood memories that evoke suffering, humiliation or disappointment; death; and departures.

Examples of painful childhoods abound within Houellebecq's fiction. These are most prevalent within *Les Particules élémentaires* where the narrative evokes the consistent suffering of Bruno Clément who is bullied at school as well as humiliated as he looks for affection from his female peers.¹⁰⁷ In the same novel the baby Djerzinski is rescued by his estranged father after being found neglected by his mother, Janine.¹⁰⁸

The neglected child is a poignant and recurrent image in Houellebecq's writing: the

¹⁰⁴ As Novak-Lechevalier has noted: 'l'œuvre romanesque de Michel Houellebecq est traversée de grands thèmes qui empruntent au répertoire traditionnels des thèmes pathétiques tels qu'ils sont énumérés pas exemple dans les manuels de rhétorique [...] certains mots-types, certains formules caractéristiques [...] constituant au fil de leurs apparitions des sortes de refrains typiques, facilement reconnaissables, et à l'efficacité pathétique certain'. Novak-Lechevalier, 'Michel Houellebecq: le pathétique en lisière', pp. 68-69.

¹⁰⁵ Novak-Lechevalier, 'Michel Houellebecq: le pathétique en lisière', p. 69.

¹⁰⁶ Houellebecq, 'Neil Young', in *Interventions 2*, pp. 185-189 (p. 187).

¹⁰⁷ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, pp. 56-57 & 50.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

baby Djerzinski is anticipated by Henri described in 'Rester vivant' who is similarly ignored by his mother as she prepares for an evening out.¹⁰⁹ Jed Martin of *La Carte et le territoire* was brought up by his father following his mother's suicide and Daniell of *La Possibilité d'une île* recounts his neglect of his own offspring. On his son, he admits: 'Je n'avais jamais aimé cet enfant: il était aussi bête que sa mère, et aussi méchant que son père'.¹¹⁰

Characters also die within Houellebecq's novels with striking regularity. *Extension du domaine de lutte* recounts the death of Tisserand. *Les Particules élémentaires* describes the deaths of Bruno's grandparents as well as Michel's grandmother and the half-brothers' mother. In addition, both Annabelle, who has had two abortions, and Christiane commit suicide while guru Francesco di Meola dies of cancer and his son David becomes a sadistic serial killer. *Plateforme* opens with the death of Michel's father and closes with the death of his partner Valérie. *La Possibilité d'une île* refers to the death of Daniell's son, the murder of the Prophet and subsequent deaths of two young cult members as well as the suicides of both Daniell and his ex-wife Isabelle. *La Carte et le territoire* details the suicide of Jed's mother and the assisted suicide of his father, it also features the bloody murders of the novelist Michel Houellebecq and his dog.

Pathos-invoking departures equally abound within Houellebecq's texts. *Les Particules élémentaires* sees Michel announce his immanent departure for remote Ireland to his partner Annabelle, whilst he himself was abandoned as a child to the care of his grandparents. Daniell of *La Possibilité d'une île* is left heart-broken following the departure of his lover Esther to start a new life in the USA, whilst in *La Carte et le*

¹⁰⁹ 'Henri a un an. Il git à terre, ses couches sont souillée; il hurle. Sa mère passe et repasse en claquant des talons dans la pièce dallée, cherchant son soutien-gorge et sa jupe. Elle est pressée d'aller à son rendez-vous du soir. Cette petite chose couverte de merde, qui s'agite sue le carrelage, l'exaspère'. Houellebecq, 'Rester vivant', p. 9.

¹¹⁰ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, pp. 29-30.

territoire, Olga leaving Jed is to be echoed by Jed's departure later in the text after her return.

Moments of intense pathos within Houellebecq's prose are also moments of intense complexity with regards to narrative perspective. There are moments where the pathetic appears to be sincerely and genuinely evoked, but there are other instances where the extent to which the reader is invited to empathise with the text is more ambiguous. The narrative largely displays what appears to be a degree of clinical distance, or lack of emotion and it equally frequently fluctuates between this and more emotionally ambivalent writing. The overall effect created is frequently an ultimately unsteady range of narrative emotional tonalities.

6a. *Les Particules élémentaires*

This subsection considers how pathos is heightened in two extracts relating to Bruno's childhood in *Les Particules élémentaires*. A notable example occurs as Bruno evokes an early memory:

Le premier souvenir de Bruno datait de ses quatre ans; c'était le souvenir d'une humiliation. Il allait alors à la maternelle du parc Laperlier, à Alger. Une après-midi d'automne, l'institutrice avait expliqué aux garçons comment confectionner des colliers de feuilles. Les petites filles attendaient, assises à mi-pente, avec déjà les signes d'une stupide résignation femelle; la plupart portaient des robes blanches. Le sol était couvert de feuilles dorées; il y avait surtout des marronniers et des platanes. L'un après l'autre ses camarades terminaient leur collier, puis allaient le passer autour du cou de leur petite préférée. Il n'avancait pas, les feuilles cassaient, tout se détruisait entre ses mains. Comment leur expliquer qu'il avait besoin d'amour? Comment leur expliquer, sans le collier de feuilles? Il commença à pleurer de rage; l'institutrice ne vint pas l'aider. C'était déjà fini, les enfants se levaient pour quitter le parc. Un peu plus tard, l'école ferma.¹¹¹

There is more to this extract than what might appear as a saccharine example of pathos invoked through a story of childhood disappointment that comes to be characteristic of his later life. The details at the opening of the extract that establish a degree of realistic detail are, however, quickly called into question through the presence of other less

¹¹¹ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 50.

realistic details that concurrently undermine them.¹¹² The scene evokes an idyll that seems overly perfect: the little girls in white dresses; the ground ‘était couvert de feuilles dorées’ and the fact that all of Bruno’s classmates are able to not only construct their garlands perfectly but place them around the necks of their ‘petite préférée’.

The scene’s exaggerated perfection certainly reinforces the frustration and exclusion felt by Bruno, a sense of exclusion that will stay with him throughout the text. Concurrently, however, it is also undermined by gentle parody as it is too pathetically extreme to be genuinely affective. The response attributed to Bruno, with its desperate repetition: ‘Comment leur expliquer qu’il avait besoin d’amour? Comment leur expliquer, sans le collier de feuilles?’ is similarly parodic in tone. From a narrative perspective, *Les Particules élémentaires* makes liberal use of *discours indirect libre*, giving the narrative voice access to the innermost thoughts of the novel’s protagonists.¹¹³ The desperate hyperbole of the remark above which appears to be attributed to Bruno, equally suggests an overall narrative or authorial voice that is here unsympathetically mocking him. This desperate questioning conveys a degree of sophistication that makes it difficult to attribute to the four-year old Bruno and a simultaneous degree of naivety that means it cannot either be fully attributed to his adult self. The remark that the girls display ‘les signes d’une stupide résignation femelle’ is similarly problematic since it also cannot be satisfactorily attributed to the infant Bruno and the explicit misogyny it introduces to the text again undermines the pathetic potential of the extract. It is also resolutely undecidable whether this interjection should be attributed to the adult Bruno, the narrative voice of the novel or is an example of an

¹¹² These details are: the specific location of the ‘parc Laperlier, à Alger’; the specific time, ‘une après-midi d’automne’; the specificity of the task given to the children, as well as the sense of place suggested by the ‘marronniers et des platanes’.

¹¹³ Houellebecq’s frequently inconsistent use of *discours indirect libre* will be considered in detail in the following chapter.

authorial intervention.¹¹⁴ There is additionally a degree of ambiguity to the final line of the extract ‘Un peu plus tard, l’école ferma’ since it is unclear whether this closure refers to the end of the school day or a more definitive closure of the school. In either case, the notion of closure, arriving as it does at the end of the paragraph, suggests a degree of intense finality. The implication here is that the finality of the school’s closure in some way reflects Bruno’s anecdote, suggesting it has had a similarly conclusive effect on Bruno’s future life.

Acute pathos is also invoked in Houellebecq’s writing through another episode drawn from Bruno’s childhood which reveals how he was bullied at boarding school. The narrative voice here is focalized through Bruno’s perspective, and uses narrative techniques that accentuate the emotional. The use of the present tense in particular lends a degree of immediacy to the violence, which is expressed in short, simply constructed and consequently direct sentences. Houellebecq’s use of language is economical which, despite its restriction, paradoxically creates an intensely pathetic effect, a technique Houellebecq uses repeatedly to accentuate pathos:

Pelé s’approche à son tour. Il est petit, râblé, extrêmement fort. Il gifle violemment Bruno, qui se met à pleurer. Puis ils le poussent à terre, l’attrapent par les pieds et le traînent sur le sol. Près des toilettes, ils arrachent son pantalon de pyjama. Son sexe est petit, encore enfantin, dépourvu de poils. Ils sont deux à le tenir par les cheveux, ils le forcent à ouvrir la bouche. Pelé lui passe un balai de chiottes sur le visage. Il sent le goût de la merde. Il hurle.¹¹⁵

There is a contrast between the extremity of the violence and the neutrality of its expression. Equally, Bruno’s dramatic responses to the aggression are expressed in simple language that is at odds with the emotion they describe: ‘[il] se met à pleurer’, ‘il hurle’ and, from the subsequent paragraph: ‘Bruno chie de peur’. The latter two reactions again occur at the end of paragraphs which again increases their emotional

¹¹⁴ Bruno frequently acts as a frame for the presentation of misogynistic (as well as racist) statements within the text and as Crowley has suggested, such statements are never fully challenged or condemned within the narrative, leaving the extent to which they are authorially endorsed unclear. This ideological ambiguity within Houellebecq’s writing will be considered in detail in the following chapter. Martin Crowley, ‘Houellebecq – The Wreckage of Liberation’, *Romance Studies*, 20:1 June 2002, pp. 17-28 (p. 18).

¹¹⁵ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, pp. 56-57.

portent. There is additionally a stark juxtaposition in the brutality of this attack on Bruno, which appears at the very beginning of a chapter, and the end of the previous section which describes Bruno's life with his grandparents in another 'chute pathétique': 'De toute façon, la vraie vie, c'était la vie avec sa grand-mère'.¹¹⁶ The contrast clearly accentuates the impact of these lines.

This incident also establishes resonances in terms of themes, images and character traits that echo both within this chapter and elsewhere in the novel, suggesting the incident has been formative in the development of his character. The aftermath of Bruno's bullying sees him found by a school supervisor 'nu, couvert de merde, recroquevillé dans les chiottes'.¹¹⁷ This directly recalls the description, a few pages earlier, where his brother, the infant Michel, is discovered by his father in similarly abject conditions after being neglected by his mother: 'Son fils rampait maladroitement sur le dallage, glissant de temps en temps dans une flaque d'urine ou d'excréments'.¹¹⁸ The brothers, while they have very different personalities as adults, have a shared foundation within childhood suffering that similarly stems from an absence of maternal influence; Bruno's boarding school is an exclusively masculine environment.

This incident is also crucial to the development of Bruno's character and is recalled throughout the narrative of *Les Particules élémentaires*. Bruno's bullying is again implicitly recalled in the final lines of the chapter where it is originally evoked, giving the chapter a notable symmetry. The incident of Bruno's bullying opens with a description of how 'Les replis de son petit ventre blanc pèsent contre la faïence du lavabo'.¹¹⁹ This is mirrored by another description of his 'ventre' at the very close of the chapter detailing the results of the transient relief brought about by Bruno's bulimic

¹¹⁶ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 55.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 57.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 40. This example also again recalls Henri of 'Rester vivant' noted above.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 56.

over-eating: ‘Son ventre était lourd. Il éprouvait du plaisir’.¹²⁰ In addition, the outward movements of Bruno’s immediate responses to the bullying: ‘[il] se met à pleurer’, ‘Il hurle’ and ‘Bruno chie de peur’ equally have a stylistic mirror in the inward motion of Bruno’s consumption.

Despite the adult Bruno’s claims to no longer be affected by the bullying,¹²¹ the incidents continue to resonate within the text when he returns to Meaux to teach. Bruno will, for example, himself feel physically threatened by a pupil (‘j’ai bien cru qu’il allait me mettre un pain’),¹²² and his own paedophilic sexual advances to a young girl student can be read as a re-imagining of the sexual nature of the bullying of which he was a victim.¹²³ His bullying is also arguably at the root of his consistent preoccupation with the size of his penis throughout the novel can be found here. In the extract above, his lack of sexual development is noted both by the narrator,¹²⁴ and by the bullies themselves.¹²⁵ The narrative, focalized through Bruno, frequently notes that he has a small penis.¹²⁶ This preoccupation can certainly be viewed from the perspective how Bruno is portrayed as an individual subject at the mercy of twin consumer and libidinal economies, each mention of Bruno’s concerns over his penis size or sexual development echoes the suffering of his childhood and is an implicit reminder of the pathos associated with this early violent and formative incident.

¹²⁰ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 62.

¹²¹ ‘Dans ces salles d’autres garçons m’avaient frappé, humilié, ils avaient pris plaisir à me cracher et à me pisser dessus, à plonger ma tête dans la cuvette des chiottes; je ne ressentais pourtant aucune émotion, sinon une légère tristesse - d’ordre extrêmement général’. Ibid., p. 236.

¹²² Ibid., p. 241.

¹²³ In his conversations with Christiane, Bruno particularly attributes his feelings of social estrangement and sexual inadequacies to his failed childhood seduction of a classmate: ‘tout était de la faute de la minijupe de Caroline Yessayan’, Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 69. In the interest of brevity, I will not explore this incident at length, or his relationship with his mother, but the narrative of *Les Particules élémentaires* implies that Bruno’s bullying has also cast deep scars in his adult life.

¹²⁴ ‘Son sexe est petit, encore enfantin, dépourvu de poils’, Ibid., p. 56.

¹²⁵ ‘Clément, ton zob est nu, dit-il, railleur; il faut aider les poils à pousser’. Ibid., p. 57.

¹²⁶ ‘pour réellement parvenir à s’infiltrer dans le réseau porno, il avait une trop petite queue’, Ibid., p. 126. In addition: ‘Il était également gêné de constater que la plupart avaient des queues beaucoup plus grosses que la sienne. Christiane lui répétait que ça ne faisait rien, que ça n’avait aucune importance pour elle. Il la croyait, elle était visiblement amoureuse, mais il lui semblait également que la plupart des femmes rencontrées dans ces boîtes éprouvaient une légère déception lorsqu’il sortait son sexe’. Ibid., p. 301.

6b. *La Possibilité d'une île*

Noguez has noted the 'abondance de litotes' within Houellebecq's writing and 'la description inexpressive ou badine de choses atroces'.¹²⁷ This is a valid observation, but there is equally a paradoxical emotional quality to this form Houellebecq's descriptive language. Another characteristic narrative technique that Houellebecq uses to manage pathos is the concise neutrality of language he uses to express moments of high emotion or tension. As Bardolle has noted: 'L'émotion soulevée par la littérature de Houellebecq s'est répandue comme une coulée de lave [...] grâce à [...] son style "plat"'.¹²⁸ There is regularly a tension between concise expression and the experience described in his work. This is a characteristic effect that is pertinently described by Novak-Lechevalier: 'les effets de sourdine dont [le pathétique] est ostensiblement affecté semblent parfois paradoxalement destinés à en exacerber les effets'.¹²⁹ I suggest a similar process can be observed throughout the pathetic 'refrains' of his fiction. In particular, the concentration of expression paradoxically increases the emotional charge of such descriptions.

In this way, an emotionality is implied, but not fully described in the text in a way that can 'restituer la violence et le caractère vertigineux du sentiment qui l'inspire'.¹³⁰ The effect is frequently accentuated by context, which invites the reader to recognise an emotionality the protagonist himself does not express in a similar way to the contrast between the bullying of Bruno and 'la vraie vie' with his grandmother. This process is illustrated by an example from *La Possibilité d'une île* where Esther announces her impending departure for the USA. The context has been provided by Daniell's moving assertion on the preceding page that Esther is 'mon unique raison de vivre' with whom he experiences 'la plus grande joie qu'un homme puisse connaître'.¹³¹

¹²⁷ Noguez, *Houellebecq, en fait*, p. 109.

¹²⁸ Bardolle, *La Littérature à vif*, p. 55.

¹²⁹ Novak-Lechevalier, 'Michel Houellebecq: le pathétique en lisière', p. 76.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹³¹ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 333. Elsewhere, this is also established in terms of overwhelming happiness. Daniell reveals, for example: 'je dirai simplement, sans exagération ni métaphore, qu'elle m'a rendu la vie. En sa compagnie, j'ai vécu des moments de bonheur intense' and

His reaction to her departure is striking: ‘Je gardai il me semble un silence total. J’étais pétrifié, dans l’incapacité de réagir, il me semblait que si je prononçais une parole j’allais éclater en sanglots’.¹³² A tension exists here between the capacity for an emotional outburst and its restriction. Indeed, this tension is heightened through a reader’s appreciation of Daniell’s feelings for Esther as considered above.

This process of pathetic concentration can be repeatedly observed throughout Houellebecq’s descriptions and characterises his writing. As well as concision of expression, which suggests a paradoxical emotional distance, the narrative equally focuses on details within the description which also frequently accentuate their emotional charge. This process can be observed within *La Possibilité d’une île* in Daniell’s description of his experiences at Esther’s birthday party at which he is present as ‘*qui se fait larguer*’.¹³³ His descriptions are mediated through what the protagonist describes as his ‘état de calme étrange’, at odds with his underlying emotion which the text has already established.¹³⁴ There is thus again a tension between Daniell’s narration here and the reader’s identification of his emotions. The language in which he relates the party demonstrates his restriction of his true feelings: ‘l’alcool m’avait aide à enrayer la montée de l’angoisse mais je la sentais toujours là, vivante au fond de moi, et prête à me dévorer au moindre signe de faiblesse’, the neutrality of its expression giving in an implicit emotional depth.¹³⁵ Daniell self-consciously observes his behaviour in a way that displays this emotional distancing and becomes preoccupied with his external appearance: ‘je me comportai assez correctement, circulant de manière semi-nonchalante parmi les invites, mon verre à la main’.¹³⁶ He observes himself involved in ‘quelques conversations simples’, but ‘la musique était trop forte et assez rapidement je

‘quelques semaines après notre rencontre, ces moments heureux ont fusionné, se sont rejoints; et ma vie entière, dans sa présence, sous son regard, est devenue bonheur’. Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d’une île*, p. 173.

¹³² Ibid., p. 334.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 336 [italics in original text].

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 337.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 336.

me contentai de hocher la tête'.¹³⁷

When Daniell describes his attempts to converse with Esther, the detached language reinforces the futility of his gesture and evokes the desperate pathos of his situation: 'je me mis en quête d'Esther et je m'accrochai à elle, littéralement et sans pudeur, je la pris par la taille et l'implorai de me parler, de me parler encore, de rester à mes côtés, de ne pas me laisser seul'.¹³⁸ Esther's anger is again de-emphasised: 'elle avait l'air vraiment furieuse maintenant'.¹³⁹ In this way, the detached description creates a tension between the extremity of Daniell's emotion and the 'calme étrange' nature of his expression.

The contrast between emotional intensity and the distance that Daniel's narrative presents them, in turn evoking its own pathos, reaches an apex when Daniell discovers Esther engaged in group sex:

Il n'y avait plus grand monde dans la pièce principale; j'enjambai plusieurs personnes dans le couloir et je finis par la découvrir dans l'une des chambres du fond, allongée au milieu d'un groupe; elle n'avait plus que sa minijupe dorée, retroussée jusqu'à la taille. Un garçon allongé derrière elle, un grand brun aux longs cheveux frisés, qui pouvait être Pablo, lui caressait les fesses et s'appêtait à la pénétrer. Elle parlait à un autre garçon, brun lui aussi, très musclé, que je ne connaissais pas; en même temps elle jouait avec son sexe, le tapotait en souriant contre son nez, contre ses joues. Te refermai la porte discrètement; je l'ignorais encore, mais ce serait la dernière image que je garderais d'elle.¹⁴⁰

This extract is emotionally unsettling, not least because it was inevitable: Daniell has speculated repeatedly throughout the novel that Esther has been unfaithful, but this is a dramatic and shocking revelation of his suspicions. His emotions are strongly implicit in this extract, despite the fact they are not directly evoked. The language remains largely objectively neutral, and reduced to bare sexual detail, but given a heightened significance because of the strength of the emotion that Daniell feels for Esther as expressed throughout the narrative. Despite the intense emotional charge of the episode,

¹³⁷ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 336.

¹³⁸ Ibid. p. 339.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 342-343.

the protagonist's humiliation as his girlfriend engages in a very public threesome, the language here remains neutral and precise.

To reinforce this, the narrative lingers on a number of particularly emotive and painful details for Daniell. The descriptions of Esther's partners, for example as 'un grand brun aux longs cheveux frisés' and 'un autre garçon, brun lui aussi, très musclé' both connote their youth and highlight the contrast between them and the ageing protagonist.¹⁴¹ In addition, the extract focuses on a precise and sexually explicit image that will be Daniell's lasting image of Esther: 'elle jouait avec son sexe, le tapotait en souriant contre son nez, contre ses joues'. This sexual image heightens the pathos of the description due to its context since Daniell's love for Esther has been defined primarily by the active and enjoyable sexual relationship he has with her. In particular, the act of oral sex is repeatedly a moment of acute happiness in their relationship, but is here replaced by a pornographic image.¹⁴² Again, as we have seen repeatedly throughout Houellebecq's prose and poetry, the closing line of the extract is particularly pathetic, Daniell's response to his discovery is to 'discrètement' leave and close the door, which forms a stark contrast with their explicit sexual behaviour and both completes and reinforces his humiliation.

6c. *Plateforme*

A similar dual process of evoking pathos through emotional distancing and focussing on specific details can be observed following the terrorist attack that appears towards the end of *Plateforme*. Again, despite the intense drama of the scene, in which the narrator's partner, Valérie, dies, the narrator's language is muted. In a similar way to the previous extract, the language in which the attack is expressed again displays a degree of neutral distance, reflecting the objective language of scientific observation: 'Je perçus

¹⁴¹ The repetition of 'brun' also perhaps highlights a racial element in the description, but this could also, of course, refer to their Mediterranean origins since the narrative setting here is Spain.

¹⁴² The act is notably described as a repeated high point in terms of his relationship with Esther. Daniell notes, for example that 'j'éprouvai un immense bonheur à jouir dans sa petite bouche'. Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 200.

alors un bruit de moteur venant de la mer’, ‘je distinguai alors les assaillants, trois hommes’ and ‘J’eus d’abord l’impression que’.¹⁴³ Emotionality however, is additionally evoked, as in the extract above through the focus on shocking or, for the narrator, painful detail and the blank neutrality of their expression. For example, evoking the recurrent image of enucleation: ‘une grande femme blonde [...] se retourna vers nous, portant les mains à son visage: une balle avait atteint son œil, son orbite n’était plus qu’un trou sanglant’.¹⁴⁴ Additionally in grisly parodic mirroring of the novel’s sex scenes and a reminder of the commodification of sex in Thailand is a potential reason for the attack: ‘un touriste allemande assis au milieu des gravats soutenait les intestins qui s’échappaient de son ventre; sa femme était allongée près de lui, la poitrine ouverte, les seins à demi arrachés’.¹⁴⁵

Valérie’s death is also described using the minimum of details:

Je poussai un cri en direction des sauveteurs: deux infirmiers s’approchèrent aussitôt, saisirent délicatement Valérie, la déposèrent sur une civière. Je tentai de me relever, puis retombai en arrière; ma tête heurta le sol. J’entendis alors, très distinctement, quelqu’un dire en français: “Elle est morte”.¹⁴⁶

A degree of pathos is clearly invoked through the simplicity of the ‘Elle est morte’, which again gains emotional gravity through its position not only at the end of a paragraph, a technique noted above, but by closing the second part of the novel. This is additionally reinforced through the context of the strength of the emotion that Michel feels for Valérie earlier in the novel and the key role she plays throughout the narrative.

6d. Pathos undermined

There is also notable instability to pathos as evoked in Houellebecq’s novels. As I have considered above with reference to Bruno’s childhood memories, they are often at least partially undermined by the perspective of the narrative that presents them. Pathos is also regularly and dramatically subverted to the extent that the reader is unable to make

¹⁴³ Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, p. 340.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 340.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 341.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 342.

a full emotional identification with the situations evoked in the text due to dramatic fluctuations in perspective. There are frequent tonal shifts in Houellebecq's writing, particularly during passages that appear to invoke pathos, that recall the 'brutal' interjections within his poetry as considered above. These shifts have been noted by Altes in *Les Particules élémentaires*, but I suggest they are typical of Houellebecq's fiction more generally. Altes notes 'l'interruption de scènes qui s'annoncent pathétiques, par un appel brutal au logos: passage soudain au discours scientifique distancé, là où le ton était intimiste'.¹⁴⁷

It may appear that a reader is encouraged to feel a certain way at moments in the text, but this is frequently undermined by these tonal shifts. Altes has noted the 'effets complexes' of such a technique which includes both humour and 'un effet rationalisateur' that demonstrates 'même [les] expériences les plus intimes et chargées d'émotion restent analysables comme des mécanismes prévisibles' as well as a 'mise à distance de ce qui est trop douloureux' within the text.¹⁴⁸ As Altes has noted, such shifts resonate with the distinctions Houellebecq has noted between the 'clinique' and 'pathétique' registers within his writing as considered above. Bruno's bullying is, for example, followed by the narrative's focalization on the school supervisor Jean Cohen whether the tone shifts from pathos to sociological observation:

Les sociétés animales fonctionnent pratiquement toutes sur un système de dominance lié à la force relative de leurs membres. Ce système se caractérise par une hiérarchie stricte: le mâle le plus fort du groupe est appelé *l'animal alpha*; celui-ci est suivi du second en force, *l'animal bêta*, et ainsi de suite jusqu'à l'animal le moins élevé dans la hiérarchie, appelé *animal oméga*.¹⁴⁹

Here, the 'pathétique' narrative description of Bruno's bullying becomes 'clinique' observation. The tone shifts from poignant detail to situate the boys' behaviour within the broader context of animal life. While the reader has been encouraged to make an

¹⁴⁷ Liesbeth Korthals Altes, 'Persuasion et ambiguïté dans un roman à thèse postmoderne', p. 37.

¹⁴⁸ Altes, 'Persuasion et ambiguïté dans un roman à thèse postmoderne', p. 38.

¹⁴⁹ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 59 [italics in original text].

emotional identification with Bruno through the techniques considered above, the narrative here justifies the inevitability of their behaviour due to the natural laws of the animal kingdom. This naturally complicates the reader's relationship with the text, resulting in an overall ambivalent or undecidable tone.

Equally, the pathos of Daniell's experience of Esther's party in *La Possibilité d'une île* considered above is challenged through the observation through a similar shift to sociological observation which emerges in the context of the protagonist's despair:

Pour Esther, comme pour toutes les jeunes filles de sa génération, la sexualité n'était qu'un divertissement plaisant, guidé par la séduction et l'érotisme, qui n'impliquait aucun engagement sentimental particulier; sans doute l'amour n'avait-il jamais été, comme la pitié selon Nietzsche, qu'une fiction inventée par les faibles pour culpabiliser les forts, pour introduire des limites à leur liberté et à leur férocité naturelles.¹⁵⁰

Pathos has been evoked around Daniell's humiliation, but the narrative again here becomes problematic. In this extract, which remains attributable to Daniell's first-person narration, Esther is less a beloved than a symptom of her generation. It unclear whether the voice that recounts this is that of Daniell looking to justify Esther's behaviour and thus de-emphasise his own emotionality. Indeed, dismissing love here as a 'fiction' can be read as undermining his feelings for Esther and thus, again complicating the extent to which the reader is able to identify with what appears to be the sincerity of the emotion he expresses.¹⁵¹

7. Conclusion

Through a close examination of significant and typical passages of Houellebecq's fiction from *Les Particules élémentaires*, *Plateforme* and *La Possibilité d'une île* this chapter has demonstrated how Houellebecq's poetic sensibility has been brought to bear on his prose fiction subsequent to *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. In addition to

¹⁵⁰ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 341.

¹⁵¹ As Best and Crowley note, an opposite movement to such undercutting of emotion can be located in Houellebecq's sex scenes as the action is frequently itself undercut by interjections of the protagonists' emotions. Best and Crowley, *The New Pornographies: Explicit sex in recent French fiction and film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 192.

considering how Houellebecq's prose frequently incorporates more classical versified poetry, it has demonstrated how poetic effects are created within Houellebecq's fiction through an authorial sensitivity to poetic metre within his prose. This chapter has additionally demonstrated that a clear continuity exists between many of the images of Houellebecq's poetry as considered in the previous chapter, particularly those relating to the eye, self-harm and decomposition. Equally, this chapter has demonstrated how the emotional engagement of the reader, in particular through pathos, is a preoccupation for Houellebecq's writing project and he repeatedly makes use of pathetic set pieces throughout his fiction to establish affect. The descriptive process, however, is frequently rendered problematic through fluctuations within narrative perspective which complicate a reader's ability to engage emotionally with his writing. This process will be considered in further detail in the following chapter.

Chapter three – Narrative perspective in Houellebecq: ‘qui parle?’ and ‘qui voit?’

1. Introduction

This chapter considers how authorial presence posits a consistent critical challenge throughout Houellebecq’s novels. This problematic notion arises implicitly within *Les Particules élémentaires* and *Plateforme* before being explicitly interrogated in *La Possibilité d’une île* and *La Carte et le territoire*. To consider authorial presence, this chapter will develop the work of Martin Crowley who has considered Houellebecq’s novels from the perspective of ‘framing’. Crowley suggests that there is a ‘strange stand-off’ between the provocative ideas presented in Houellebecq’s writing and how they are framed both by their status as literature and the characters that present them.¹ Crowley concludes that the extent to which the text endorses these attitudes is frequently unclear since both the misogynistic remarks and their unconvincing frames exist in a state of uncomfortable ‘undecidability’ within Houellebecq’s fiction. With regards to the misogyny of Houellebecq’s work, Crowley concludes: ‘We are left [...] with an approach to framing in which, rather than qualifying its material, the frame sits alongside it, offering one interpretative possibility, irreducible and irrelevant. The texts in a sense collapse themselves, leaving two residues: misogyny [...] and this patchy framing material’.²

This chapter explores the roles of such frames and framing within Houellebecq’s work, particularly those provided by his narrators. It will do so with brief reference to Gérard Genette’s work on narrative focalization since it raises two pertinent critical questions for Houellebecq’s work: ‘qui parle?’ and ‘qui voit?’. In considering Houellebecq’s novels from this perspective, I demonstrate how these questions are consistently, and often provocatively, problematized in his fiction. I will consider that,

¹ Martin Crowley, ‘Houellebecq – The Wreckage of Liberation’, p. 18

² Ibid., p. 26.

despite a range of characters and narrators ‘qui voient’, their construction is often inconsistent and thus suggests an overall authorial presence ‘qui parle’. The extent to which such ambiguity is a product of authorial intention is unclear, but it clearly contributes to the overall effect of Houellebecq’s work.

The issue of authorial presence is particularly pressing with regards to a reader’s emotional engagement. As Robinson argues, a reader’s emotional encounter with realist literature is regulated through the figure of the ‘implied author’ who emerges as a point against which he relates his emotional reactions to a text. Robinson has considered this process with reference to a novel by Edith Wharton:

When I read *The Reef*, I respond emotionally to the thoughts and images it provokes, and on reflection I make inferences about how appropriate my reactions are and whether Wharton intended me to respond emotionally in the way that I do [...]. In assessing the appropriateness of my reactions, I am implicitly constructing the author as a certain sort of person. I am responding emotionally to the author as she seems to me to be: in other words, I am responding to the implied author “Edith Wharton”.³

In this way, the author implicitly emerges throughout the reading process as a point against which the reader measures the appropriateness of his or her emotional responses. As I will consider, the figure of the implied author poses a critical challenge for Houellebecq’s writing since the extent to which the reader is expected, and indeed able, to identify with the author implied by his texts is frequently acutely problematic. The implied author is frequently observable within Houellebecq’s writing but his role as a figure against which a reader can measure the appropriateness of his or her responses is frequently unstable. This further posits a challenge to a reader’s ability to engage emotionally with Houellebecq’s writing.

This chapter provides a systematic analysis of narrative perspective within Houellebecq’s novels. After a brief consideration of Genette’s notion of focalization, it considers *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *Les Particules élémentaires* and, in the

³ Robinson, *Deeper Than Reason*, p. 179.

latter, examine the inconsistencies that suggest authorial presence in what is ostensibly a third-person omniscient text narrated by a posthuman. In doing so I highlight what I describe as ‘slippage’ between narrator and authorial presence. Secondly, my analysis of *Plateforme* examines the anti-Islamic attitudes it presents from the perspective of framing. I speculate how such attitudes could be viewed sympathetically from the perspective of characterisation before suggesting their inconsistencies and frequency are most correctly viewed as implicit proof of authorial intervention. The third section considers *La Possibilité d’une île*, in particular how the implied authorial presence of Houellebecq’s previous work is here brought into the text through an explicit interrogation of Houellebecq’s media persona. It argues that this is problematized through what appears to be the narrator’s paedophilic desire. The final section examines *La Carte et le territoire* and suggest how it presents a somewhat ‘sanitised’ image of Houellebecq’s media persona before considering how the murder of Michel Houellebecq staged by the text can be read as a metacritical comment on authorship.

2. Genette on narrative focalization

Genette’s work provides a useful framework for a consideration of narrative perspective. In *Discours du récit* he argues for an approach to texts that problematizes the role of the narrator. For Genette, analysis that limits its descriptions to ‘first-person’ or ‘third-person’ narratives risks overlooking a text’s true complexity. This can result in what he describes as a ‘fâcheuse confusion [...] entre la question *quel est le personnage dont le point de vue oriente la perspective narrative?* et cette question tout autre: *qui est le narrateur?* – ou, pour parler plus vite, entre la question *qui voit?* et le question *qui parle?*’⁴

Genette proposes an approach to narrative that considers the process of focalization, where the perspective of an overall narrating voice within a text, which

⁴ Gérard Genette, *Discours du récit* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), p. 190 [italics in original text].

may or may not be authorial, is focalized by the frame or frames provided by a character or characters. In this way he suggests an approach that treats narration as the focalization of the thoughts of an overall narrator ('qui parle') through one character, many characters or, indeed, no character ('qui voit').⁵ This approach allows us to describe two key figures within narrative: that of the overall narrator and the individual character through whom the narrator's perspective is focalized. In this way, Genette introduces distance within the process of narration. The narrating character within a text, or the point through which the narrative is focalized, can be described in terms of his or her relationship with the text's narrator who, of course, may be the narrating character himself. As Genette has also noted, this overall narrator can also frequently be described in terms of its relationship with the text's author.⁶ This distinction is pertinent with reference to Houellebecq's fiction which frequently maintains a complex relationship between character and narrator. As I shall demonstrate throughout this chapter, this relationship is further problematized through the close proximity of narrator and authorial presence in his novels.

The process of focalization thus provides us with a conceptual framework with which to approach narrative within Houellebecq's texts. In addition to the figures of narrator and focalizing characters, my analysis here will also consider how his fiction

⁵ For Genette focalization operates in different ways through the varying extent to which a text restricts or provides narrative information to its narrating voices. He provides examples of three forms of narrative perspectives which illustrate this process. Firstly, he describes the 'récit classique' as having 'focalisation zéro' in that the omniscient narrating subject has unrestricted access to the world s/he describes and presents in in those terms precisely without the focalizing this from the perspective of an individual character or characters (Ibid., p. 194). Secondly, Genette describes the process of 'focalisation interne' where the narrative is restricted to the perspective from one character ('fixe') or alternates between several ('variable' or 'multiple') (Ibid.). Finally, Genette considers 'focalisation externe' (Ibid., p. 195) where, as with 'objective' or behaviourist writing, examples of which can be located in the work of writers such as Dashiell Hammett or Ernest Hemingway, text is restricted to external or 'outside views' of 'what would be visible and audible to a virtual camera' of narrative information'. Manfred Jahn, 'Focalization', *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. by David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 94-107 (p. 98).

⁶ In his *Discours du récit*, Genette is hesitant to discuss the author of a text but in a subsequent essay, he suggests that the figure responsible for overall control of focalization is 'le narrateur – ou, si l'on veut sortir des conventions de la fiction, l'auteur lui-même, qui délègue (ou non) au narrateur son pouvoir de focaliser, ou non'. Gérard Genette, 'Nouveau discours du récit' in *Discours du récit* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), pp. 293-425 (p. 347).

constructs what Wayne Booth, along with Robinson, has described as a text's 'implied author': how they suggest the persona of Michel Houellebecq himself who can frequently be located on the fringes of his texts.⁷ Whereas Genette's notion of focalization is largely used to describe how narrative information possessed by a narrating character can be restricted to protagonists who, as in the case of a detective in a *polar* for example, might only have a partial view of events, I will here use the model to consider how authorial presence can be mapped in Houellebecq's work.

3. *Extension du domaine de la lutte*: challenging the narrative 'je'

For the most part, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* is accurately described as a first person homodiegetic narrative. Using Genette's terminology, it adopts a form of 'focalization interne' where the narrator and the character who focalizes the narrative are largely the same figure. Indeed, much of the novel establishes the robustness of this narrative 'je': it is established both as 'qui parle' et 'qui voit'. The subject who articulates the narrative is thus sustained throughout as an anonymous, thirty-year-old depressive IT consultant. This perspective, however, is not consistent throughout the text. There appears to be evidence of 'slippage' in the narrative which suggests an additional narrative voice that lies behind the narrative: narrator and narrating character are not necessarily here congruent.⁸ This can be observed, as I shall suggest, in inconsistent narrative focalization, in terms of the relationship between style and character as well as the central character's status as writer of fiction. This challenges the

⁷ Wayne Booth has defined the 'implied author' in terms of how '[a text] creates an implicit picture of an author who stands behind the scenes, whether as stage manager, as puppeteer, or as an indifferent God, silently paring his fingernails. This implied author is always distinct from the "real man" – whatever we may take him to be – who creates a superior version of himself, a "second self", as he creates his work'. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Second Edition (London and Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 151.

⁸ I will make reference to narrative slippage throughout this chapter. The origin of the term is Julian Barnes' review essay on *Plateforme* where he identifies inconsistencies in Michel's narrative that imply the presence of Houellebecq as author. I will similarly use the term to describe inconsistencies that suggest authorial presence. Julian Barnes, 'Michel Houellebecq and the sin of despair', in *Through The Window* (London: Vintage, 2012), pp. 135-146 (p. 143).

stability of the narrative ‘je’ within *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and reveals a higher degree of narrative ambiguity that is immediately evident.

A strict narrative ‘focalisation interne’ should preclude the narrating character of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* having a fully omniscient view of the world he inhabits. This perspective is largely sustained throughout the novel as the hero only presents information about other characters that he would either reasonably know or be able to speculate about. When the narrator supplies information about the family of the unfortunately-named Brigitte Bardot, he reinforces its credibility by suggesting his own research: ‘*J’ai pris quelques renseignements sur lui*’.⁹ Equally, when he visits a pornographic cinema in Rouen, the text clarifies that the narrator is speculating about the reason for the constant re-location of the male clients when a couple enters the auditorium: ‘*Leur espoir, je pense, est que la femme du couple jette un regard sur leur sexe*’.¹⁰ Finally, he fantasises about the shopping habits of Catherine Lechardoy: ‘*Je l’imaginai aux Galeries Lafayette, choisissant un string brésilien en dentelle écarlate*’.¹¹

There is, however, a striking lapse in this ‘focalisation interne’ in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, which sees the narrative tip uncharacteristically into omniscience or ‘focalisation zéro’. The hero reveals what appear to be the very precise circumstances of his conception:

C’est également un 26 mai que j’avais été conçu, tard dans l’après-midi. Le coït avait pris place dans le salon, sur un tapis pseudo-pakistanaï. Au moment où mon père prenait ma mère par derrière elle avait eu l’idée malencontreuse de tendre la main pour lui caresser les testicules, si bien que l’éjaculation s’était produite. Elle avait éprouvé du plaisir, mais pas de véritable orgasme. Peu après, ils avaient mangé du poulet froid.¹²

It is, of course, both unreasonable and unlikely that the narrator would have access to information about his parents of such an intimate nature. There are a number of viable textual implications of this omniscient insurgence. It could, for example, be regarded as

⁹ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, pp. 87-88 [my emphasis].

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 71 [my emphasis].

¹¹ Ibid, p. 46 [my emphasis].

¹² Ibid., pp. 150-151.

a lapse in the author's control of his narrative or a 'flaw' in his composition, an issue that will be considered in more detail in the following section. It could also be read as a sign of the character's deteriorating mental health since the extract appears in the closing pages of the novel where he appears in the grip of mental disorder. Equally, this example could be read as an uncharacteristic use of metaphor by the narrating character who, with both the clinical descriptions of sex and the post-coital 'poulet froid' reflects both the sexual disenchantment and absence of love that run throughout the novel.¹³

Such a lapse of narrative focalization can also be read as a sign of a narrating voice that provides a different perspective to that of the narrating hero and whose vision extends further beyond the confines of the latter's first-person viewpoint. This perspective is here also articulated in terms of the text's 'je' and it equally reveals a broader omniscient viewpoint that the hero does not have access to for the remainder of the text. From the perspective of Genette's focalization, there appears to be a subtle shift in the amount of narrative information provided to the hero 'qui voit', providing a broader glimpse of 'qui parle'.

A critical study of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* reveals two additional discrepancies in solidarity between narrator and hero that also suggest the presence of an additional, and more obscure, narrative voice. There is a considerable gulf between the confidently aphoristic style of much of the text and the characterisation of the main protagonist. There is an inconsistency, for example, between the narrating character's confident assertions that 'Il y a cinq ou six siècles, Rouen a dû être une des plus belles villes de France; mais maintenant tout est foutu',¹⁴ 'On s'habitue vite à l'hôpital',¹⁵ and 'Ce monde a besoin de tout, sauf d'informations supplémentaires',¹⁶ and his self-

¹³ This reading is reinforced by its resonance with Tisserand's own poultry-inspired reference in his analysis of his own position within society: 'J'ai l'impression d'être une cuisse de poulet sous cellophane dans un rayon de supermarché'. Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 99.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 83.

effacing behaviour which sees him sit in a darkened room whilst waiting for a client ‘en partie par peur de signaler ma présence’,¹⁷ and agreeing when a client questions the usefulness of his presence at a meeting.¹⁸ This can certainly be read as a sign of two sides of his personality: how he thinks and how he acts socially do not necessarily need to be congruent. Concurrently, however, we can also read such a discrepancy as an additional slippage within narrative perspective which suggests an additional narrative voice that cannot be accounted for by character traits.

A close reading of the novel also reveals that the narrating character’s status as writer is problematic. He is ostensibly the author of the text as well as the passages of ‘fictions animalières’ it incorporates.¹⁹ A consideration of his authorship, however, reveals the circumstances of the text’s composition are in fact deeply ambiguous. As considered above, the narrative ends with the narrator appearing in the grip of a mental breakdown, which has been coloured by fantasies of both suicide and self-harm. At the end of the text, he wanders through vague countryside and asserts that ‘le but de la vie est manqué’.²⁰ It is not clear what, if any future course of action, he will be able to take aside from suicide, which seems a strong possibility. The narrative here seems to undermine itself since the text appears to have been written at a point subsequent to the end of the narrative. This is a point that the narrative implies might not actually exist, given the bleakness of the narrator’s depression at the end of the text and his implicit suicide. It is perhaps, left to the reader to assume that the text has been produced after the narrator’s mental illness has somehow alleviated, but this is an assumption that the text gives no grounds for making aside from its existence.²¹

¹⁷ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 29

¹⁸ ‘Poussant son argument, il en arrive à suggérer implicitement que, dans ces conditions, ma propre présence est elle aussi inutile, ou tout du moins d’une utilité restreinte. C’est bien ce que je pense’. Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 9.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 151.

²¹ This ambiguity is also deepened by the third chapter of the text which adds a degree of meta-narrative by addressing the reader directly. This leads the reader to consider if this is the voice of the narrative character, or indications of an alternative, authorial presence, particularly since the biographical details

Similarly, the narrating character's status as author of bizarre pseudo-philosophical 'fictions animalières' is problematic in terms of the stability of his narrative voice. While the text's hero claims responsibility for the overall text as well as the examples these animal stories, they are both very different in terms of style, a gap that is not satisfactorily reconciled within the text. The language of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* is largely correctly described as 'plat'. These animal fictions, described by Dion as displaying a 'style burlesque surchargé', contain a degree of hyperbole that appears to suggest a parody of philosophical and scientific texts not observable elsewhere in the text.²² The convoluted language of the 'Dialogues d'un teckel et d'un caniche', for example,²³ suggests this is not completely the sincere 'méditation éthique' it claims to be.²⁴ As Dion has argued, the 'fictions animalières' certainly serve to offer a degree of theoretical reflection on the human behaviour displayed elsewhere in the text.²⁵ Despite this role within the overall economy of the novel, they are also stylistically incongruous within the context of the characterisation of the text's hero in that their playful, parodic nature again provides a contrast to the narrator's depressive personality and again undermines the overall stability of the text's narrating voice.

To what source are we to attribute this narrative voice, and where do the inconsistencies within the narrative point? It is possible to suggest that both imply an identifiable authorial presence that lies behind the text's narration and that does not necessarily coincide completely with it. This slippage is visible throughout *Extension du*

the narrator here introduces seem to reflect the contemporary circumstances of the real-world Michel Houellebecq who was, concurrently to the writing of the text was working in a similar 'cadre moyen' role to its narrating character. Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, pp. 12-14.

²² Dion, 'Faire la bête', p. 61.

²³ For example: 'L'an dernier, aux alentours du 23 août, je me promenais sur la plage des Sables-d'Olonne, accompagné de mon caniche. Alors que mon compagnon quadrupède semblait jouir sans contrainte des mouvements de l'air marin et de l'éclat du soleil (particulièrement vif et délicieux en cette fin de matinée), je ne pouvais empêcher l'étau de la réflexion d'enserrer mon front translucide, et, accablée par le poids d'un fardeau trop pesant, ma tête retombait tristement sur ma poitrine'. Ibid., p. 85.

²⁴ Ibid., 9.

²⁵ As Dion notes, for example of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*: 'les lois du social sont inévitablement inféodées aux lois de la nature [...] à la loi de la jungle'. Dion, 'Faire la bête', p. 56.

domaine de la lutte and has been noted by Lakis Proguidis as ‘un abandon de l’autonomie du personnage au profit de la voix unique de l’auteur’, as noted briefly in the previous chapter.²⁶ For Proguidis, there are moments within the text where this becomes evident:

Ainsi, nous lecteurs, nous perdons momentanément de vue le monde débroussaillé pendant l’errance du personnage. Le romancier l’attire vers lui. La scène s’obscurcit. Nous sentons qu’il se produit une chute. De l’intérieur du romancier une force a émergé, force qui attire vers elle l’ensemble du monde. Cela ne dure heureusement pas longtemps.²⁷

From the perspective of focalization, there is largely a unity between narrator and character in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. Proguidis’ analysis reinforces the conclusion that there are also clear signs of authorial presence to be located within the text. This assessment is clearly also based both on his knowledge of Houellebecq’s poetry and his personal relationship with the author, but it is also revealing since it confirms an additional level of complexity to the narrative voice within Houellebecq’s novel.²⁸

4. *Les Particules élémentaires*: an ambiguous narrative perspective

Les Particules élémentaires is ostensibly a third-person narrative. The narrating voice, which describes both the decline of contemporary human society and its eventual disappearance in a ‘mutation métaphysique’,²⁹ appears to represent a new species, one that has superseded humanity and offers a distanced critique of ‘cette espèce infortunée et courageuse qui nous a créés’.³⁰ As a close analysis of the novel however reveals, this narrating voice is acutely unstable. Gerald Prince has noted a ‘thematic clarity’ within *Les Particules élémentaires*, but I will demonstrate that this is undermined by text’s ambivalent overall attitude to its themes.³¹ An analysis of this posthuman voice reveals

²⁶ See p 94 above.

²⁷ Lakis Proguidis ‘Michel Houellebecq, de la poésie au roman’, pp. 183-184.

²⁸ Since the pair collaborated on the journal *Perpendiculaire* when Proguidis’ article was published.

²⁹ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 10.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 394.

³¹ Gerald Prince, ‘*Les Particules élémentaires*: Self-Portrait’, *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*,

that its status as objective posthuman belies a more subjective voice that is not congruent with such a status.³² The narrator of *Les Particules élémentaires* initially appears to present a consistent vision of ‘qui voit’ and regulates ‘qui parle’ within the text, but this is frequently complicated by what appears to be an additional voice, one that results in narrative slippages that appear to suggest the text’s implied author, rendering both questions highly problematic.

The dominant narrative viewpoint of *Les Particules élémentaires* is established in the opening paragraph of the prologue:

Ce livre est avant tout l’histoire d’un homme, qui vécut la plus grande partie de sa vie en Europe occidentale, durant la seconde moitié du XX^e siècle. Généralement seul, il fut cependant, de loin en loin, en relation avec d’autres hommes. Il vécut en des temps malheureux et troublés. Le pays qui lui avait donné naissance basculait lentement, mais inéluctablement, dans la zone économique des pays moyen-pauvres; fréquemment guettés par la misère, les hommes de sa génération passèrent en outre leur vie dans la solitude et l’amertume.³³

The novel immediately establishes a distance, both temporal and physical, between this narrating voice and its protagonists. Djerzinski, through whom much of the narrative is focalized, is ‘un homme’, typical of his species which is categorically not that of the text’s narrative voice. This description establishes him primarily as a deterministically inseparable product of the socio-economic context into which he was born. The language here is quasi-scientific with the narrative voice in possession of a wide range of anthropological information about the historical period it describes. This informed and distanced perspective provides much of the novel’s narration, legitimising the focalized descriptions of its characters and their thoughts, making widespread use of *style indirect libre*.

The apparent posthuman identity of the novel’s narrative voice is further reinforced within the epilogue. It is revealed that the humanity described within the text

36, Winter 2012, 48-57 (p. 54).

³² Altes has noted that: ‘rien ne nous assure [...] qu’il s’agit à travers tout le texte d’une seule et même “voix”’. Altes, ‘Persuasion et ambiguïté dans un roman à thèse postmoderne’, p. 35.

³³ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 9.

has died out in an orchestrated genetic ‘mutation métaphysique’. Humanity as described in the novel is thus practically extinct when the novel is narrated, as is suggested, at around the year 2080.³⁴ It has been replaced by ‘une nouvelle espèce, asexuée et immortelle, ayant dépassé l’individualité, la séparation et le devenir’, to which the narrative voice belongs.³⁵ It would perhaps be conceivable that the narrator is a remnant of humanity, which as we learn is in its final throes,³⁶ but it again stresses a clear distinction between his new race and that of ‘les humains’.³⁷ In this epilogue the narrative voice is also clear about the time that has lapsed between the events narrated and their narration. In his consideration of the religious objections to the genetic extinction of humanity, it stresses an ideological gap between the posthuman community and humans: ‘Même si ces notions nous paraissent *aujourd’hui* difficiles à comprendre’.³⁸

4a. Unsteady style indirect libre

An analysis of the apparently consistent narrative voice, however, reveals a number of inconsistencies that undermine its posthuman status. This is evident in the imprecise use the text makes of *style indirect libre*. Prince asserts that *Les Particules élémentaires* gives ‘a master class on narrative omniscience’, but this is not as consistent or as masterful as it initially appears.³⁹

Éric Bordas has noted how the text makes extensive use of Flaubertian *style indirect libre*.⁴⁰ This is not always stable. The comparison between Houellebecq and

³⁴ The epilogue refers to the birth of the first cloned human in 2029 and then continues: ‘Aujourd’hui, près de cinquante ans plus tard’, Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, pp. 392-393, which allows us to estimate a date from which the novel is narrated.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 385.

³⁶ ‘Leur taux de reproduction, cependant, diminue d’année en année, et leur extinction semble à présent inéluctable’. Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 393.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 393.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 385 [my emphasis].

³⁹ Prince, ‘*Les Particules élémentaires*: Self-Portrait’, pp. 52-53.

⁴⁰ ‘Le style indirect libre est redoutable chez Houellebecq’. Bordas has also suggested, for example, that the description of Jean-Yves Fréhaut in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, notably the assertion that ‘Il votait socialiste’ (p. 41) evokes the ‘discours indirect libre très classique’, in particular ‘l’illustre “Il était républicain” de *L’Éducation sentimentale*, début de l’autoprésentation du très satisfait de lui-même

Flaubert in this regard is a pertinent point of comparison. Laurence M. Porter has described the latter's use of *style indirect libre* and demonstrated how Flaubert is frequently careful to reduce ambiguity in his use of the technique by explicitly anchoring attitudes and discourse to specific characters.⁴¹ As he notes, there is the consistent risk, that if it is not clarified, of confusion with the 'phantom presence of the implied author'.⁴²

Houellebecq's own use of *style indirect libre* can be observed within *Les Particules élémentaires*. It frequently displays a Flaubertian precision, but it equally can be read in terms of how the technique implies this 'phantom presence'. Bruno's arrival at the 'Lieu du Changement' campsite provides some notable examples of the former as the narrative perspective focalizes into what appear to be the character's thoughts:

Sur la droite, un chemin devait conduire à la mer; deux adolescentes traînaient un canard en plastique. Elles n'avaient rien en dessous de leur tee-shirt, les salopes. Bruno les suivit des yeux; il avait mal à la bite. Les tee-shirts mouillés, se disait-il sombrement, c'est quand même quelque chose.⁴³

This extract clearly demonstrates a movement from external observation, the first sentence, to the use of *style indirect libre* to demonstrate Bruno's lustful thoughts about the young girls, as suggested by their description as 'les salopes'. Any ambiguity about the source of this assertion is neutralised by the explicit focalization on Bruno, 'il avait mal à la bite', which reinforces both as Bruno's thoughts. This is reinforced by the final sentence of the extract, as the 'se disait-il' clarifies that the contemplation of the wet t-

Arnoux'. Éric Bordas, 'Ironie de l'ironie', *Les lieux du réalisme. Pour Philippe Hamon*, ed. by Vincent Jouve and Alain Pagès (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2005), pp. 341-358 (p. 352).

⁴¹ 'Free *indirect* discourse (FID, alias *style indirect libre*) [...] slows our reading. The device is not actually 'free' but rather, ambiguous: it intrudes a phantom presence of the implied author or narrator beside the character. We do not know which words to ascribe to whom; some may belong to both. FID forces readers to play closer attention to a passage, to examine it for signs of naïveté, prejudice, self-deception, or bad faith. Context provides clear clues to which character's discourse may be presented in 'unbound' form through focalization: the character most recently denoted – provided that the denotation is accompanied with a verb of perceiving, thinking, writing, or saying – is the one whose discourse appears in the nearest following passage of FID. For added clarity, Flaubert often refocalizes on the same character at the conclusion of the FID'. Laurence M. Porter, 'The art of characterisation' in *The Cambridge Companion to Flaubert*, ed. by Timothy Unwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 122-144 (p. 125).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 122.

shirts can be attributed to Bruno.

The narrative of *Les Particules élémentaires* is, however, frequently more ambiguous in a manner that challenges Prince's assertion of Houellebecq's 'masterful' control of his narrative. Prince has praised *Les Particules élémentaires* for being 'able to tell it like it was',⁴⁴ but it is frequently extremely difficult to deduce whether the characters, the narrator or indeed the author himself is doing the telling.⁴⁵

Style indirect libre is frequently imprecise in *Les Particules élémentaires*. This results in the apparent narrative slippage where the attitude or information presented by a character fits comfortably neither within the frame of that character, or the narrating voice of the novel as established in the prologue and epilogue. In this way, the source to which attitudes expressed in the novel are to be attributed in terms of either context or focalization is unclear and can frequently be read as provocative authorial intervention.

The text describes Djerzinski's relationship with his cousin Brigitte: 'Brigitte était une jolie fille de seize ans, d'une gentillesse extrême, qui devait quelques années plus tard épouser un connard épouvantable'.⁴⁶ The attribution of this 'connard épouvantable' is problematic: is the reader to associate this judgement with Michel or another voice from within the narrative? It does not seem readily consistent with the posthuman narrator as introduced in the preface. There is no explicit focalization on the character's thoughts to clarify and the derogatory nature of the description, for example, seems inconsistent with the characterization of the mild-mannered Michel.⁴⁷ Similarly, when Michel sits in his car after a work party, contemplating why his colleague does

⁴⁴ Prince, '*Les Particules élémentaires*: Self-Portrait', p. 53.

⁴⁵ Bordas compellingly suggests: 'Houellebecq appuie le trait, prenant le risque de ne pas être compris dans sa mise en content dérisoire d'une contextualisation ironisante de nos stéréotypes idéologiques et linguistiques'. Bordas, 'Ironie de l'ironie', p. 353.

⁴⁶ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 44.

⁴⁷ This is arguably confirmed in favour of Michel later in the novel where Brigitte's relationship is again described: 'Il aimait bien Brigitte, et aurait souhaité qu'elle soit heureuse; mais avec un mari aussi con c'était manifestement difficile'. The description of Michel's positive feelings for Brigitte would appear to allow a reader to attribute the description of her husband as 'con' here to Michel. I would argue, however, that the lack of narrative proximity (it is separated by one hundred and fifty pages) provides little in the way of narrative clarity to the example cited above. Ibid., p. 194.

not herself drive away, his speculative: ‘Se masturbait-elle en écoutant du Brahms?’, appears incongruous within Michel’s character as established elsewhere in the text.⁴⁸ Such sexual speculation, for example, could be seen as more typically characteristic of Michel’s brother Bruno, but Michel’s libido is virtually non-existent in the novel. As the narrator declares, ‘sa bite lui servait à pisser, et c’est tout’.⁴⁹

Narrative ambiguity is also paradoxically generated by over-precision or over-insistence that the thoughts belong to a particular protagonist. A provocative consideration of gay sexuality is over-explicitly attributed to Bruno. In insisting that ‘homosexuels’ are more appropriately described as ‘pédérastes’, the texts repeated insistence that these of the thoughts of Bruno,⁵⁰ rounded off with a final, dramatic ‘voilà ce que pensait Bruno’ over insists on the distinction between the thoughts of a character and the narrating voice of the text, again implying authorial presence.⁵¹

4b. Character traits of authorial voice

The implicit authorial voice that interjects the narration of *Les Particules élémentaires* has recognisable character traits that differentiate it from that of the text’s posthuman narrator. Indeed, this repeatedly presents a slightly leering, reductive and stereotypically masculine perspective on sex that again seems incongruous in the context of the posthuman narrator’s supposed asexuality. This is illustrated, for example, by the following description of Annabelle’s developing sexual maturity:

A partir de l’âge de treize ans, sous l’influence de la progestérone et de l’œstradiol sécrétés par les ovaires, des coussinets graisseux se déposent chez la jeune fille à la hauteur des seins et des fesses. Ces organes acquièrent dans le meilleur des cas un aspect plein, harmonieux et rond; leur contemplation produit alors chez l’homme un violent désir.⁵²

This displays a degree of scientific neutrality, in that it accurately describes the

⁴⁸ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 18.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 28.

⁵⁰ The text clarifies: ‘pensait par exemple Bruno’, ‘Lui-même’ and ‘aimait à dire Bruno’. Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, pp. 132-133.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., p. 74.

changing shape of the growing female human body and could clearly lead a reader to attribute it to the novel's posthuman narrator. It, however, concurrently suggests an unsettling degree of lingering narrative interest in the developing 'seins' et 'fesses' of adolescent girls.⁵³ Indeed, the reader is left to consider the extent to which the ostensibly posthuman narrator shares this 'violent désir', or to question whether there are elements of human desire present a posthuman narrative perspective.

The narrating voice is also displays a distinct moral tone that intervenes repeatedly in the novel. In one of the passages where the text appears to focalise on one character for an extended period, Bruno recounts 'l'hypothèse Macmillan' which argues that: 'les *serial killers* des années 90 étaient les enfants naturels des *hippies* des années 60', suggesting that the cultural liberalism of the 1960s were responsible for a social movement towards extreme individualism, the natural consequence of which was murder.⁵⁴ Bruno also equates this tendency with subsequent violent artistic movements such as the Vienna Actionists. The narrative voice intervenes at the end of Bruno's story:

il était quatre heures du matin et il n'y avait aucun activiste viennois dans la salle. De fait Hermann Nitsch croupissait actuellement dans une prison autrichienne, incarcéré pour viol de mineure. Cet homme avait déjà dépassé la soixantaine, on pouvait espérer un décès rapide; ainsi, une source de mal se trouverait éliminée dans le monde. Il n'y avait aucune raison de s'énerver à ce point.⁵⁵

It is impossible to definitively attribute this voice to Bruno, the narrator or Houellebecq himself. The assertion that Nitsch, one of the leaders of the Actionist movement 'croupissait actuellement dans une prison autrichienne' does not appear to be immediately attributable to Bruno, but to a narrative voice that appears to have a more accurate idea of the artist's whereabouts. Although Bruno is a literature teacher, he makes no reference to any knowledge of or interest in conceptual art such as that

⁵³ Similar thoughts are, of course, equally attributed to Bruno at a later stage in the novel, such as pp. 130-131, but again they do not share any significant narrative proximity and thus impact on this extract.

⁵⁴ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 261 [italics in original text].

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

produced by the Actionists. Indeed, the reference here appears to be built on a misunderstanding of the facts of the case since, although Nitsch has spent time in jail, his Actionist colleague Otto Muehl was in fact sentenced to seven years in prison in 1991 for sexual offences involving minors.⁵⁶ Such a factual error, which was corrected in the text's English translation, but not in any of the subsequent French re-editions, again undermines the narrative voice's encyclopedic, omniscient posthuman status.⁵⁷ The assertion that 'on pouvait espérer un décès rapide' is also problematic since it also suggests a degree of opinion that is not easily reconciled with what appears to be the main narrative voice of the text and also implies authorial intervention.⁵⁸

This voice, ambiguous in origin but distinctly moral in tone, again appears to interject in a consideration of the 'libération des mœurs' within France in the years following 1968, including the 1974 *loi Veil*.⁵⁹ The narrative appears to decry such developments: 'L'agnosticisme de principe de la République française devait faciliter le triomphe hypocrite, progressif, et même légèrement sournois, de l'anthropologie matérialiste'.⁶⁰ The use 'hypocrite' and 'sournois' are not attributable either to the text's posthuman narrator or to any identifiable character. Criticism from a posthuman narrator, who would owe his own existence to the genetic modification made possible the research legitimised by the 'libération des mœurs' he appears to denounce, would be surprising, thus again suggesting it is again a contemporary authorial presence 'qui parle'.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Bert Rebhandl, 'Clean Up Your Act', *Frieze Magazine*, 84 (2004)

<http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/clean_up_your_act> [accessed April 30, 2013].

⁵⁷ Houellebecq, *Atomised*, trans. by Frank Wynne (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 253.

⁵⁸ Furthermore, it is important to note that Houellebecq himself has at various moments throughout his literary career been repeatedly critical of the Vienna Actionists in a way that further strengthens the case for authorial intervention here. In an essay he has declared that 'ma répugnance pour les actionnistes viennois reste entière'. Houellebecq, 'Préface', in *Erotoscope*, Tomi Ungerer (Paris: Taschen, 2001), pp. 10-11 (p. 10).

⁵⁹ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 89.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁶¹ A claim of authorial intervention here could be reinforced by Houellebecq's assertion in a media interview that 'je trouve sympas les catholiques traditionalistes'. Jérôme Garcin and Fabrice Piskin, 'Réponse aux "imbéciles"', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 1770, 8 October 1998, pp. 130-134 (p. 134).

4c. Narrative inconsistencies

As well as these implicit authorial interjections, the narrative voice of *Les Particules élémentaires* is additionally undermined by what appear to be inconsistencies in its posthuman perspective. Crowley has argued that the narrative position ‘occasionally forget[s] itself and speak[s], not from the future of our eventual disappearance, but as our contemporary’.⁶² Such narrative lapses can also be read as further examples of implicit authorial interventions or implicit reminders of authorial presence. The following extract considering agricultural reform illustrates this: ‘Il s’agit d’une vie depuis longtemps disparue de nos contrées, dont l’analyse exhaustive n’offre donc qu’un intérêt limité’.⁶³ The ‘nos contrées’ suggests a shared frame of reference with the reader or a reference to the narrator’s contemporary society. Neither, however, would be convincing since the narrator speaks from the 2080s following Djerzinski’s ‘mutation métaphysique’ where the existence of both distinct ‘contrées’ and the ‘certains écologistes radicaux’ also mentioned in this passage must seem unlikely. Similarly, as Crowley observes, the narrative forgets itself in the ‘aujourd’hui’ of the following extract ‘À d’autres époques, le bruit de fond était constitué par l’attente du royaume du Seigneur; aujourd’hui, il est constitué par l’attente de la mort’.⁶⁴ Finally, when the narrative recounts the platitudes exchanged after Annabelle’s death, the narrator again seeks an impossible shared point of reference with the reader and appears to momentarily forget it is a member of an immortal species where individuality has been eradicated: ‘Annabelle mourut le surlendemain, et pour la famille c’était peut-être mieux. Dans les cas de décès, on a toujours tendance à dire une connerie de ce genre’.⁶⁵

⁶² Crowley, ‘Houellebecq – The Wreckage of Liberation’, p. 26.

⁶³ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 32

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 105

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 356 [my emphasis].

5. *Plateforme*: ambiguous narrative perspective

The circumstances of the text's narration within *Plateforme* initially seem to be more robust. This section will consider such stability before examining the framing of the novel's narration, suggesting how this could allow for a textually-justified reading of the provocative anti-Islamic attitudes it presents before considering how the text's insistence on them make such a reading more problematic since they again appear to point towards an implicit authorial presence. I will suggest that while a reader is encouraged to make an emotional identification with the implied author, such engagement is consistently made more challenging.

The narrative of *Plateforme* is largely focalized through a first-person narrative voice. This narrating 'je' is established within the opening pages of the novel where the text presents specific biographic details that enable the reader to construct its coherent identity.⁶⁶ This testimony sees the narrator recall what amounts to a series of incidents from roughly the previous two years of his life. His narrative is supported by instances where the text focalizes more broadly to assume an omniscient perspective.⁶⁷ These moments provide background information to Valérie's youth, her work experiences with Jean-Yves as well as the latter's home life. These moments, however, differ from the imprecision that is characteristic of *Les Particules élémentaires* and the narrative appears more robust. Within *Plateforme* it is less accurate to describe the narrative as 'forgetting itself' as in Crowley's analysis of *Les Particules élémentaires*.⁶⁸ Examples of omniscient narration here are generally reinforced by knowledge a reader could reasonably accept the narrating voice to be in possession of. The description of

⁶⁶ For example, he declares: 'J'ai quarante ans', 'Je ne me suis pas marié' and 'Je travaille au ministère de la Culture. Je prépare des dossiers pour le financement d'expositions, ou parfois de spectacles'. Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, pp. 11 & 20.

⁶⁷ This can be described as a reversal of the narrative process in *Les Particules élémentaires* which opens with omniscience and then focalizes through characters. In *Plateforme*, the focalized perspective gives way to omniscience.

⁶⁸ Crowley, 'Houellebecq – The Wreckage of Liberation', p. 26.

Valérie's childhood and sexual awakening, for example, largely falls within the realm of knowledge Michel can be reasonably expected to have of his partner.⁶⁹

5a. Aphorisms, provocation, framing

Narrative preoccupation with precision can equally be observed in the way *Plateforme* frequently presents categorical social, metaphysical or artistic 'truths' which are firmly attributed to the narrator. There consequently appears to be a close proximity between 'qui voit' and 'qui parle'. Morrey has noted the 'absence of a higher authorial voice, [which] means Houellebecq himself cannot be exonerated from implication in the offensive attitudes that Michel displays'.⁷⁰ Such observations are presented as aphorisms which appear throughout and are consistently attributed to the narrating voice. Frequently such statements recount social observations:

La vie était chère en Occident, il y faisait froid; la prostitution y était de mauvaise qualité. Il était difficile de fumer dans les lieux publics, presque impossible d'acheter des médicaments et des drogues; on travaillait beaucoup, il y avait des voitures et du bruit, et la sécurité dans les lieux publics était très mal assurée. En somme, cela faisait pas mal d'inconvénients.⁷¹

Elsewhere, statements similar in tone present similarly firm judgements in relation to broader observations about existence: 'On peut caractériser la vie comme un processus d'immobilisation, bien visible chez le bouledogue français – si frétilant dans sa jeunesse, si apathique dans son âge mûr',⁷² 'on ne devient jamais *réellement adulte*',⁷³ or 'C'est dans le rapport à autrui qu'on prend conscience de soi; c'est bien ce qui rend le rapport à l'autrui insupportable'.⁷⁴

Michel's provocative aphorisms also play a more obscure role. The extent to which the reader is expected to take his more provocative assertions at face value is not

⁶⁹ Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, pp. 60-64. There are, for example, occasions when this technique is not entirely consistent. A detailed consideration of the breakdown of Jean-Yves marriage and a sexually explicit description of the seduction of his fifteen-year-old baby sitter is followed by a not entirely convincing: 'Il me raconta tout cela une semaine plus tard, sur un ton d'autoaccusation assez pénible'. Ibid., p. 304.

⁷⁰ Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, p. 84

⁷¹ Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, p. 339.

⁷² Ibid., p. 123.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 11 [italics in original text].

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 94.

immediately clear. Aedín Ní Loingsigh has argued that *Plateforme* ‘seems almost entirely devoid of irony, a fact that further adds to the discomfort felt when reading the text’.⁷⁵ The narrator repeatedly describes women, in a crude or misogynistic way: ‘Qu’est-ce qu’il y a, exactement, dans la tête des femmes? Elles acceptant si facilement les termes du jeu’,⁷⁶ ‘À quoi comparer Dieu? D’abord, évidemment, à la chatte des femmes’,⁷⁷ ‘Ces filles ne s’intéressant pas du tout au sexe, mais uniquement à la séduction – et encore il s’agissait d’une séduction élitiste, trash, décalée, pas du tout érotique en fait’.⁷⁸ Attitudes presented in this way are also frequently racial: ‘les Blancs voulaient être bronzes et apprendre des danses de nègres; les Noirs voulaient s’éclaircir la peau et se décrêper les cheveux: L’humanité entière tendait instinctivement vers le métissage’.⁷⁹ The narrator is equally categorical about Chinese people: ‘reconnaissables à leur saleté’,⁸⁰ and children generally: ‘Après tout un enfant c’était comme un petit animal, avec il est vrai des tendances méchantes’.⁸¹

The narrative is also littered with casually dysphemistic statements. These are frequently made about women, with ‘ salope ’ being a particularly frequent example. Airhostesses are described as ‘salopes’,⁸² Babette ‘avait de beaux seins, la salope’,⁸³ together with her friend Léa they are described as ‘les salopes’,⁸⁴ as are teachers of literature.⁸⁵ Josiane is equally ‘la salope’,⁸⁶ whilst Valérie is ‘un peu mère de famille et un peu salope’.⁸⁷

⁷⁵Aedín Ní Loingsigh, ‘Tourist Traps Confounding Expectations in Michel Houellebecq’s *Plateforme*’, *French Cultural Studies* 16:73 2005, 73-88 (p. 82).

⁷⁶Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, p. 131.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 169.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 215.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 244.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 111.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 333.

⁸²Ibid., p. 37.

⁸³Ibid., p. 46.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 49.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 85.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 55.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 57.

To what extent should such comments be read sympathetically from the perspective of character, and to what extent should they be regarded as provocation? I will initially consider the former. Crowley's notion of framing allows us to establish a greater understanding of how such problematic assertions function. He is correct to observe that the novel's narrative sits within a frame which 'destabilizes the positions it presents' to a certain extent, but he is, however, incorrect to describe the frame as of Michel in *Plateforme* here as 'relatively gentle' since his analysis that does not fully consider how the narrative frame of the novel is fully nuanced in the final third of the text.⁸⁸

This is a common oversight in critical readings of the novel. As noted above, *Plateforme* is narrated retrospectively. More precisely, the Michel Renault, who acts as the frame for the novel's narration, narrates from the position he is in following the death of his beloved Valérie in a terrorist attack. This is made explicit in the final pages of the novel, which clearly suggest that the narrator has written the entire text from such a post-traumatic position. The narrator implies that the process of writing has been an attempt to improve his mental health following the disaster: 'J'achetai plusieurs rames de papier 21 x 29,7 afin d'essayer de mettre en ordre les éléments de ma vie'.⁸⁹ Equally, at the close of the novel he is explicit that the book he has written in the aftermath of Valérie's death is the one that the reader is about to finish: 'Mon livre touche à sa fin', an end highlighted by the movement into the present tense in the final chapter of the text.⁹⁰

There are, in fact, two 'frames' for the two narrative perspectives Michel presents throughout the text. The first is the Michel of the bulk of the narrative who deals with his father's death, meets and ultimately loses Valérie. It is this Michel 'qui voit' or through whom the majority of the narrative is focalized. In the final chapter of

⁸⁸ Crowley, 'Houellebecq – The Wreckage of Liberation', p. 22.

⁸⁹ Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, p. 364.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

the novel, the narrative refocalizes to ‘six mois plus tard’, the narrative shifts from the past to present tense and Michel as writer emerges. This Michel is the entire novel’s narrative voice, presented as ‘qui parle’, and who acts as the overall frame through which the earlier Michel is viewed and described throughout the text.

Rather than a ‘gentle’ or partial frame, the frame provided by this latter Michel is particularly distinct. Its full extent, however, is only evident to the reader once he or she has a full understanding of the protagonist’s mental state at the end of the novel when they have finished reading the narrative. At this point, the larger frame of Michel, or the extent to which the novel is narrated from a position of extreme mental suffering, becomes fully visible. Michel suggests that ‘l’absence de Valérie ne m’a jamais autant fait souffrir’,⁹¹ describes himself as ‘insensibilisé’,⁹² and suggests he is afflicted by ‘douleur’ and feels surrounded by ‘une barrière étouffante et triste’.⁹³ Importantly, he suggests he feels ‘un immense mépris’ for the Western world.⁹⁴ These are symptoms that can would appear to resonate with what a sufferer of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) could be expected to display, and could be attributed to his status as a victim of a terrorist attack. Notably, the *DSM-IV* highlights that ‘emotional anesthesia’, a reduced ability to feel emotion and feelings of ‘detachment or estrangement’ are typical symptoms of the condition.⁹⁵

It is this ‘immense mépris’ that provides the frame for the narrative of the whole novel, and through which the consistently provocative assertions of the novel can be considered. In particular, ‘irritability or outbursts of anger’ are also a symptom of PTSD.⁹⁶ This reading of the text has been reinforced by Raphaël Sorin, editor of *Plateforme*, in a defence that has largely been overlooked by critics of Houellebecq’s

⁹¹ Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, p. 366.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 367-368.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 369.

⁹⁵ *DSM-IV*, pp. 424-429.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

work.⁹⁷ Looking back on the period immediately following the narrator's release from hospital, he recalls:

L'islam avait brisé ma vie, et l'islam était certainement quelque chose que je pouvais haïr; les jours suivants, je m'appliquai à éprouver de la haine pour les musulmans. J'y réussissais assez bien, et je recommençai à suivre les informations internationales. Chaque fois que j'apprenais qu'un terroriste palestinien, ou un enfant palestinien, ou une femme enceinte palestinienne, avait été abattu par balles dans la bande de Gaza, j'éprouvais un tressaillement d'enthousiasme à la pensée qu'il y avait un musulman de moins.⁹⁸

In response to critical attacks on the novel and this extract in particular in the period immediately following the publication of the novel, Sorin took the unusual step of clarifying to media that a degree of narrative framing was at work and such attitudes were not necessarily to be attributed to Michel Houellebecq himself. 'Contrairement à ce qu'on peut penser', Sorin stated, the extract was 'citée dans la bouche d'un personnage'.⁹⁹ In relation to a question about the extract, Houellebecq also clarified that 'dans la situation où il se trouve, il est normal que Michel ait envie qu'on tue le plus de musulmans possible'.¹⁰⁰ In the light of our conclusion that the novel's narrative perspective stems from the period following Valérie's death, a sympathetic reading of the text suggests that Sorin and Houellebecq's justifications can be extended to the novel as a whole, rather than just this provocative extract. This challenges Ní Loingsigh's assertion that 'Grief [...] does not mitigate the essential problem of Michel's religious prejudice which he reveals on numerous occasions prior to the traumatic events of his last holiday with Valérie'.¹⁰¹ On the contrary, grief could indeed be seen to mitigate such a problem since it provides the perspective from which the entire narrative, and narrative attitudes to those events, are articulated.

⁹⁷ Christopher Hitchens is rare amongst critics to have noted 'the thoughts are those of a person who is recovering from grave physical and mental damage'. Christopher Hitchens, 'Holy Writ', *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 2003 <<http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/2003/04/hitchens.htm>> [accessed on 2 May 2013] (para 6 of 15).

⁹⁸ Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, p. 357.

⁹⁹ 'M. Houellebecq "ne prend pas à son compte" les propos de son personnage', *Agence France Presse*, August 31, 2001.

¹⁰⁰ Didier Sénécail, 'Entretien, Michel Houellebecq', p. 31.

¹⁰¹ Loingsigh, 'Tourist Traps Confounding Expectations in Michel Houellebecq's *Plateforme*', p. 85.

5b. *Plateforme* and Islam

Reading *Plateforme* in a way that seeks to explain such attitudes is problematic since it risks somewhat neutralising their provocative value and endorsing the unacceptable. Such a reading cannot however completely account for the presence of the attitudes that appear throughout the text. This is of particular critical interest from the perspective of the sustained anti-Islamic attitudes which are introduced by what ultimately comes across as clumsy narrative technique. This serves to make a sympathetic reading of the text difficult since they cannot be reconciled quite as readily into the overall economy of the novel due to the frequency and clumsiness of their articulation. Barnes has noted of *Plateforme* that ‘There are problems with the narrative’ and that a sense that ‘[Houellebecq is] a clever man who is a less than clever novelist obtrudes most in the novel’s dealings with Islam’.¹⁰² Moreover, such narrative ‘problems’ point towards authorial presence and again suggest ‘qui parle’.

The narrative presents three Arab characters who all play minimal plot roles within the novel. All three are critical of Islam and their origins, together with their intelligence and education, appear to exist to legitimise their anti-Islamic statements, a technique described by Sweeney as ‘crudely executed narrative ventriloquism’ and ‘a strategy of disowning’.¹⁰³ These characters can be seen to exist within the narrative almost exclusively as mouthpieces for such sentiments. As Barnes notes: ‘[it is e]xtraordinary that three casual meetings on three different continents should turn up three vociferous Arab Islam-despisers who disappear from the narrative immediately after their work is done’.¹⁰⁴

The meeting with the first of these, Aïcha, ‘une fille sérieuse’ and student nurse, is the most convincing and arguably the least ‘casual’ since she was the lover of Michel’s father who her brother murdered as a consequence of their relationship,

¹⁰² Barnes, ‘Michel Houellebecq and the sin of despair’, p. 143.

¹⁰³ Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair*, p. 111.

¹⁰⁴ Barnes, ‘Michel Houellebecq and the sin of despair’, p. 144.

instigating the plot.¹⁰⁵ Her second meeting with Michel, however, sees her comment disparagingly on her brothers: ‘ils s’entretiennent mutuellement dans leur connerie, ils se bourrent la gueule au pastis tout en se prétendant les dépositaires de la vraie foi, et ils se permettent de me traiter de salope parce que j’ai envie de travailler plutôt que d’épouser un connard dans leur genre’.¹⁰⁶ Michel tentatively agrees: ‘C’est vrai, dans l’ensemble, les musulmans c’est pas terrible...’.¹⁰⁷ Aïcha’s attitude also appears to permit Michel’s subsequent mental image: ‘sur les flux migratoires comme des vaisseaux sanguins qui traversaient l’Europe; les musulmans apparaissaient comme des caillots qui se résorbaient lentement’, an assertion that is also superfluous in context of the novel as a whole.¹⁰⁸

Another example of this incongruous technique appears in the context of a meeting between Jean-Yves, Valérie and Michel who are discussing strategic matters related to their plans for a chain of prostitution-friendly hotels. The issue of how to proceed within Arabic countries is addressed, prompting an atypical and clumsy external analepsis which recalls a meeting between Michel and an Egyptian three years previously. The character’s credentials are overstressed, he is ‘intelligent et souvent drôle’, ‘impeccablement vêtu’, as well as educated: ‘Biochimiste de formation [et il] avait brillamment réussi dans le domaine de l’ingénierie génétique’. In addition, ‘il n’avait [...] pas de mots assez durs pour stigmatiser l’islam’.¹⁰⁹ In a lengthy section of reported speech, the character reveals how he feels the growth of Islam hindered the development of Arabic culture and concludes ‘L’islam ne pouvait naître que dans un désert stupide, au milieu de bédouins crasseux qui n’avaient rien d’autre à faire [...] que d’enculer leurs chameaux’.¹¹⁰ Similarly, Michel fortuitously meets ‘un banquier

¹⁰⁵ Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

jordanien' at a hotel coffee shop who reveals 'le problème des musulmans'.¹¹¹ The banker is categorical that 'le système musulman était condamné' since 'le paradis promis par le prophète existait déjà ici-bas' in brothels and lap-dancing clubs.¹¹² Following this encounter the banker, like his predecessors within the text, disappears from the narrative.

The three characters' Arabic backgrounds appear designed to provide credibility to the anti-Islamic positions they espouse. However, rather than seeing them blend into the narrative, their incongruity in terms of plot redundancy and over-insistence on their backgrounds draws attention to them. It could, of course, be possible to suggest that such characters and their critical stances can be attributed to a post-traumatic Michel, ostensibly author of the text. This would naturally raise the question why such attitudes need to be distanced or legitimised by the frame provided by these characters when Michel himself, as we have seen, is already explicitly anti-Islamic.

The unconvincing framing of these anti-Islamic attitudes consequently implies the presence of the author. Since it appears there is no textual justification for them to be framed within the text by Michel Renault as author, we are thus forced to consider their place within the novel as a whole. In this way, their clumsy, exaggerated and over-insistent status points towards the presence of Houellebecq who, as Barnes has pointed out, might not be in complete control of his material. In particular, it draws attention to the process of the text's composition and leads a study of *Plateforme* to consider the possibility that the framing of these attitudes through unconvincing characters is designed to distance or 'insulate' the text's author from the criticisms his text makes about Islam.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, pp. 357-358.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 358.

¹¹³ These examples are similarly joined by other poorly sketched characters who also primarily seem introduced into the narrative in order to serve as mouthpieces for opinions: Andreas a German living in Bangkok and encountered by Michel in vague circumstances, appears designed solely to suggest the practicality of raising a family in Thailand, *Ibid.*, pp. 331-332. Equally, Michel meets 'un homosexuel' in

I am critically wary of making too close an identification of the man and his work, but this is an identification Houellebecq appears to actively encourage us to make by naming his narrator Michel. Indeed, the extent to which the author himself shares the anti-Islamic sentiment of his character is underlined by the author's own paratextual comments. In an interview with the magazine *Lire*, Houellebecq notoriously asserted: 'la religion la plus con, c'est quand même l'islam. Quand on lit le Coran, on est effondré... effondré!',¹¹⁴ a declaration that led to his highly-mediatised prosecution for 'complicité de provocation à la discrimination, à la haine ou à la violence à l'égard d'un groupe de personnes en raison de son appartenance à une religion' and 'injure' by a number of French Islamic groups. As the following two sections of this chapter will demonstrate, such scandal and media provocation will be explicitly brought back into Houellebecq's texts and interrogated, further problematising the narrative within his novels *La Possibilité d'une île* and *La Carte et le territoire*.

6. *La Possibilité d'une île*: provocative proximity

This section will briefly consider what I will describe as Houellebecq's paratextual media persona before arguing that this is explicitly interrogated within *La Possibilité d'une île*. It will consider how the novel encourages the reader's identification of Daniell, the text's main protagonist, with Houellebecq's media persona. Finally this chapter will consider how the encouraged identification between Daniell and the author is provocatively problematic as a result of the protagonist's sexual desire for young girls.

As well as the provocative content of his novels, Houellebecq has established a reputation as a provocateur for his assertions and behaviour in media interviews. He has given the impression he is drunk, made explicit sexual references and propositioned his female interviewers as well as what appear to be deliberately controversial statements.

a Pattaya pub who serves as an illustration of how 'On vient pas à pas Pattaya pour refaire sa vie, mais pour la terminer dans les conditions acceptables', p. 362.

¹¹⁴ Didier Sénécal, 'Entretien, Michel Houellebecq', p. 31.

In addition to the notorious interview for *Lire* noted above, Houellebecq has additionally declared his admiration for Stalin and spoken freely about his participatory visits to Parisian *clubs échangistes*.¹¹⁵ Such provocation has led to the emergence of a distinct persona within French media. This was succinctly confirmed by the newspaper *Libération* which, reporting his Prix Goncourt win in 2010 for *La Carte et le territoire*, declared ‘La revanche d’un emmerdeur’.¹¹⁶ The British *Sunday Times* has described him as ‘a pornographer, [...] a racist, a sexist, a homophobe and a nihilist’.¹¹⁷

For Jérôme Meizoz, Houellebecq’s media persona should be read as a continuation of that suggested by his fiction. Meizoz argues that Houellebecq – a pseudonym for Michel Thomas – can be viewed as a fictional creation that ranks alongside his protagonists:

La posture de Houellebecq met en scène une caractéristique de l’écrivain à l’ère de l’opinion publique et des médias de masse [...]. [L]’auteur pseudonyme se met à la traîne de sa fiction: la posture “Houellebecq” consiste à rejouer *machinalement* dans l’espace public, le personnage d’antihéros au propos “socialement [in]acceptables” auquel il a délégué la narration. [L]a conduite de fiction (les propos du narrateur) précède ici la conduite sociale (ceux de la posture auctoriale) et semble la générer. Tout se passe comme si, une fois Michel Thomas l’“auteur biographique” laissé hors de tout cela, le procédé renvoyait dans l’univers fictionnel non seulement les personnages et le narrateur, mais également la posture “Houellebecq”.¹¹⁸

For Meizoz, Houellebecq is a product of the contemporary media which expects continuity between a text’s narrator and the author who appears within the public sphere. This is a process that Houellebecq appears happy to comply with. As I shall demonstrate, however, such complicity is self-conscious within his fiction. *La Possibilité d’une île* can be read in terms of how it critically considers, and even parodies, this media posture, particularly in the light of the post-*Plateforme* media scandal considered above.

¹¹⁵ See Bertrand Leclair and Marc Weitzmann, ‘Le Désir liquidé’ in *Les Inrockuptibles Hors série Houellebecq*, 2005, pp. 56-62.

¹¹⁶ *Libération*, 8 November 2010.

¹¹⁷ Jan Battles and Anne Lucey, ‘Sex row author traced to Irish isle’, *Sunday Times*, 26 August 2001.

¹¹⁸ Meizoz uses ‘posture auctoriale’ to suggest a ‘posture littéraire’. Jérôme Meizoz, *L’Œil sociologue et la littérature* (Geneva: Slatkine Érudition, 2004), p. 201[italics in original text].

La Possibilité d'une île explicitly interrogates 'la posture "Houellebecq"', particularly through the character of Daniell who recalls Houellebecq's media presence. Daniell is a popular comedian whose situation clearly reflects that of the biographical author during the period post-*Plateforme*. *La Possibilité d'une île* was published in 2005 following the highly-mediatised and controversial launches of his previous two novels. Daniell is similarly a controversial and successful artist – his profession of 'humouriste' clearly resonates with Houellebecq's as novelist. Houellebecq's previous novels were praised for the critical picture of contemporary social reality he presents in his fiction,¹¹⁹ Daniell is himself critically praised as 'un observateur acéré de la réalité contemporaine', a description that could equally be applied to Houellebecq himself.¹²⁰ Both have enjoyed an 'ascension vers la gloire et la fortune'.¹²¹

Daniell's success, like Houellebecq's, has a footing in both misogynistic and Islamic provocation. Daniell recounts a joke from his one man show which is of a similar misogynistic order to the comments attributed to Bruno in *Les Particules élémentaires* as considered above:

- "Tu sais comment on appelle le gras qu'y a autour du vagin?
 - Non.
 - La femme".¹²²

Daniell adds that he was able to 'placer ce genre de trucs sans cesser d'avoir de bonnes critiques dans *Elle* et dans *Télérama*',¹²³ which also accurately reflects Houellebecq's broadly positive reception within the traditionally liberal press.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ For example: 'L'œuvre romanesque et poétique de Michel Houellebecq est [...] la seule à s'inscrire dans le paysage mental et sociologique de la France contemporaine majoritaire, celle des 'petits blancs' déclassés de l'ex-classe moyenne, dont il a su exprimer la mentalité mieux que personne', Marc Wietzmann, 'L'Arpenteur' in *Les Inrockuptibles Hors-série Houellebecq*, April 2005, pp. 16-19 (18).

¹²⁰ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 21 [italics in original text].

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 30

¹²² Ibid., p. 22.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ *Elle* has been supportive of Houellebecq – an early version of *Lanzarote* was distributed with the magazine – whereas *Télérama* has given more lukewarm reviews of his novels. Houellebecq has been consistently championed in the liberal *Les Inrockuptibles*, which has proffered positive reviews of his work, front-page features and even a special edition of the publication celebrating his work. *Le Monde*, has also been a consistent champion of Houellebecq with its writer Josyane Savigneau acting as a defence witness in his trial.

In particular, Daniell's *succès de scandale* is inseparable from and arguably a result of his criticism of Islam. One of Daniell's shows in particular resonates with Houellebecq's own experiences, with its alliterative title clearly provocatively recalling *Plateforme*:

Le spectacle "ON PRÉFÈRE LES PARTOUZEUSES PALESTINIENNES" fut sans doute le sommet de ma carrière – médiatiquement s'entend. Je quittai brièvement les pages "Spectacles" des quotidiens pour entrer dans les pages "Justice-Société". Il y eut des plaintes d'associations musulmanes, des menaces d'attentat à la bombe, enfin un peu d'action.¹²⁵

This description mirrors Houellebecq's experiences post-*Plateforme* which saw the author embroiled in the high-profile scandal noted above, and was similarly played out in the news pages of the French press.¹²⁶ In addition to the 'plaintes d'associations musulmanes' he received, it has equally been reported that Houellebecq was also the victim of death threats during that period.¹²⁷ For Daniell, as for Houellebecq, 'l'espace d'une ou deux saisons, je m'étais retrouvé dans la peau d'un héros de la liberté d'expression'.¹²⁸ Houellebecq was eventually acquitted following a high-profile trial, during which supporters, including Salman Rushdie who published a high-profile comment piece in *The Guardian* and *Libération*, defending Houellebecq's freedom of speech.¹²⁹

Daniell's targeting of Islam not only mirrors Houellebecq's own critical remarks, but also presents an exaggerated parody of both them and the media furore they created. Rushdie's defence of Houellebecq stressed the need to 'defend the autonomy of the literary text, its right to be considered on its own terms, as if the author were [...] anonymous', and it appears that Houellebecq is provocatively exploiting the autonomy of literature to such an extent that it is impossible to separate the man from

¹²⁵ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 47.

¹²⁶ Josyane Savigneau, 'Les propos de Michel Houellebecq sur l'Islam suscitent l'indignation', *Le Monde*, 3 September 2001, p. 20.

¹²⁷ Andrew Hussey, 'Agent provocateur', *The Observer*, 6 November 2005.

¹²⁸ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 48.

¹²⁹ Rushdie asserted: 'if an individual in a free society no longer has the right to say openly that he prefers one book to another, then that society no longer has the right to call itself free'. Salman Rushdie, 'A platform for closed minds', *The Guardian*, 28 September 2002.

his text.¹³⁰ The opening pages of *La Possibilité d'une île* can be read against the background of the trial as deliberate provocation. Daniell highlights how he has 'une tete d'Arabe' and speculates 'avais-je pour géniteur un Mustapha quelconque?',¹³¹ while the 'PARTOUZEUSES PALESTINIENNES' show has a 'ton de burlesque islamophobe léger' and features the short film 'PARACHUTONS DES MINIJUPES SUR LA PALESTINE'.¹³²

It is notable that Daniell, the avatar for Houellebecq himself, is more direct, consistent and aggressive in his critical treatment of Islam than Houellebecq in his previous fiction or, indeed, even in his media interviews. In such a way, Houellebecq appears to use the character of Daniell to parody his own post-*Plateforme* media scandal as well as provocatively exploiting the autonomy of literature noted by Rushdie. It is also notable that Daniell, at the suggestion of his partner Isabelle, introduces a 'soupçon d'antisémitisme' into his work to balance the levels of provocation, an act which can perhaps be read as a suggestion that Houellebecq's own provocation has, to some extent, been deliberately orchestrated as part of a marketing campaign.¹³³ Concurrently, Houellebecq is, of course, providing further provocative comments within the frame provided by Daniell as controversial comedian as well as appearing to take advantage of the relative immunity provided by his acquittal for inciting racial hatred.¹³⁴

6a. Problematic authorial identification

Despite the identification the reader is encouraged to make between Daniell and Houellebecq, such identification is frequently problematic. One recurrent preoccupation of *La Possibilité d'une île* which is absent to such an extent elsewhere in Houellebecq's

¹³⁰ Rushdie, 'A platform for closed minds'. Best and Crowley suggest that in *La Possibilité d'une île*, Houellebecq has 'enthusiastically' embraced the freedom of his acquittal. Best and Crowley, *The New Pornographies*, p. 184.

¹³¹ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 23.

¹³² Ibid., p. 49.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ 'Injure contre l'islam: l'écrivain Michel Houellebecq relaxé', *Agence France Presse*, 22 October 2002.

work is the sexualisation of young girls, present here in terms of what appears to be Daniell's paedophilic desire. Houellebecq's treatment of the matter is problematic because of its ambiguity within the context of authorship. If a reader is encouraged to make the comparison between the popular comedian Daniell who harbours anti-Islamic and misogynistic views and the popular novelist Michel Houellebecq who harbours similar thoughts, Daniell's lust for 'jeunes filles' and the extent to which this lust is shared by the author complicates this identification.

On flicking through a copy of the provocatively-named *Lolita* magazine, Daniell notes:

j'avais [...] été surpris par l'incroyable niveau de pétasserie qu'avaient atteint les publications pour jeunes filles: les tee-shirts taille dix ans, les shorts blancs moulants, les strings dépassant de tous les côtés, l'utilisation raisonnée des Chupa-Chups... tout y était.¹³⁵

Daniell's surprise here never extends into the condemnation of such sexualised content, rather the vulgar 'pétasserie' suggests he is less concerned with the exploitation of children than the magazine's overall banality. This preoccupation can be observed elsewhere, Daniell remembers a family holiday where his thirteen year-old sister 'commençait à allumer tous les mecs',¹³⁶ and recounts how Esther 'avait fait l'amour pour la première fois à l'âge de douze ans'.¹³⁷ Two years later: 'il s'était passé pas mal de choses, elle avait vraiment découvert les jeux sexuels. Quelques partouzes, oui. Un peu de SM'.¹³⁸ Both examples are presented without either endorsement or condemnation, rather with an acceptance that girls from twelve to fourteen are not only attractive but in Esther's case, sexually active and engaging in extreme sexual practices.

The most striking example of such ambiguity occurs when Vincent and Daniell, taking a break from the Elohmite retreat on Lanzarote, stumble upon a Thomson

¹³⁵ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, pp. 31-32.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 208.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

Holidays tour party who have organised a beachfront ‘Miss Bikini Contest’.¹³⁹ The contestants are ‘une dizaine de pétasses âgées de treize à quinze ans’. The girls start to dance:

l’une après l’autre, les filles s’avancèrent sur scène, en bikini, pour effectuer une sorte de danse érotique: elles tortillaient des fesses, s’enduisaient d’huile solaire, jouaient avec les bretelles de leur soutien-gorge, etc. La musique était de la house à fort volume. Voilà, ça y était: nous étions dans le *monde normal*.¹⁴⁰

Again, Daniell does not condemn the scene, seeming more concerned about Vincent’s reaction than his own.¹⁴¹ Indeed, their eventual departure appears more for the benefit of Vincent, rather than Daniell.¹⁴² The suggestion that this is what happens ‘dans le *monde normal*’ again suggests his acceptance of it. Daniell’s refusal to commit to the appropriateness or otherwise of such a spectacle is, however, undermined by his language. A fourteen year-old girl has ‘l’air d’une vraie salope’.¹⁴³ The language regarding the girls’ on-stage behaviour is also revealing since the narrative appears to linger over the descriptive detail, again implying Daniell’s complicity in the sexualisation of the girls: ‘elles tortillaient des fesses, s’enduisaient d’huile solaire, jouaient avec les bretelles de leur soutien-gorge’¹⁴⁴.

Similar sexualisation of adolescents can be observed throughout the text. Again, refusing to condemn, he suggests, expanding the vision of the libidinal economy which mirrors that sketched by Houellebecq throughout his work, that paedophilic desire is an inevitable product of contemporary society: ‘Augmenter les désirs jusqu’à l’insoutenable tout en rendant leur réalisation de plus en plus inaccessible, tel était le

¹³⁹ There is also an additional level of complexity here. The translator of *La Possibilité d’une île* and *La Carte et le territoire* into English, Gavin Bowd, has himself suggested he wrote this scene: ‘One scene in the novel was in fact written by myself for the aborted film version of *Platform*. It involves a Miss Bikini Contest on Lanzarote with east European Lolitas and a black man dressed as a circus chimp’, Gavin Bowd, ‘Genius in the margins’, *The Scotsman*, 22 October 2005. In my reading of the scene, however, I assume Houellebecq’s authorship of the entire text since it was published entirely under his own name.

¹⁴⁰ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d’une île*, p. 263 [italics in original text].

¹⁴¹ ‘Il était à peu près autant à sa place dans cette animation de plage que Samuel Beckett dans un clip de rap’, *Ibid.*, p. 262.

¹⁴² ‘Je lui proposai de partir au moment où la Russe fourrait une main dans la culotte de son bikini’, *Ibid.*, p. 263.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

principe unique sur lequel reposait la société occidentale'.¹⁴⁵ Inevitably then, Daniell reveals himself to be part of this process:

Je me souvenais d'être passé le matin même devant le lycée Fénelon. C'était entre deux cours, elles avaient quatorze, quinze ans et toutes étaient plus belles, plus désirables qu'Isabelle, simplement parce qu'elles étaient plus jeune.¹⁴⁶

Daniell's attitude to young girls is also reinforced through the provocatively ambiguous language that Daniell consistently uses. He repeatedly refers to attractive 'jeunes filles' throughout the text, without clarification of what his definition of how old a 'jeune fille' is. Esther is repeatedly described as 'une très jolie jeune fille',¹⁴⁷ whilst he asserts 'comme toutes les très jolies jeunes filles elle n'était au fond bonne qu'à baiser'.¹⁴⁸ To a certain extent, such language is legitimised by the age gap between himself and Esther, she is 22, he is 47 when they meet, but its frequent use within the text, particularly in the light of his admission of sexual attraction to adolescent girls and his lack of clarification makes his use of the terms highly ambiguous.¹⁴⁹ This has the potential to be problematic from a reader's perspective, particularly given the proximity of Daniell to the text's author as suggested above.

Houellebecq is fully aware of the ambiguity surrounding the language he has used to describe the sexualisation of children. Notably he has previously explored precisely this issue in written responses to a series of questions posed by the literary *revue L'Infini* in an edition exploring 'La question pédophile' in 1997. Houellebecq

¹⁴⁵ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 85.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 218.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 219. He also recounts masturbating 'en matant les adolescentes à poil' through a telescope. Ibid., p. 97.

¹⁴⁹ There are additional examples of such language to be found within the text including: 'Je pris le train pour Biarritz le jour même; il y avait un changement à Hendaye, des jeunes filles en jupe courte et une atmosphère générale de vacances', p. 347. 'Le temps changeait rapidement, la chaleur n'allait pas tarder à s'installer sur le Sud de l'Espagne; des jeunes filles dénudées commençaient à se faire bronzer, le weekend surtout, sur la plage à proximité de la résidence', p. 392. 'La conscience de mon héroïsme me fit passer une excellente après-midi; je décidai quand même dès le lendemain de repartir pour Paris, probablement à cause de la plage, des seins des jeunes filles, et de leurs touffes; à Paris il y avait également des jeunes filles, mais on voyais moins leurs seins, et leurs touffes', p. 395. 'Il me fallait bien sortir, de temps en temps, pour racheter de la bière et des biscottes, en général je revenais par la plage, évidemment je croisais des jeunes filles nues, et même en très grand nombre: elles se retrouvaient la nuit même au centre d'orgies d'un pathétique irréalisme dont j'étais le héros'. Ibid., pp. 416-417.

here expresses an early formulation of Daniell's notion of how paedophiles are an inevitable product of contemporary society considered above: 'le pédophile me paraît le bouc émissaire idéal d'une société qui organise l'exacerbation du désir sans apporter les moyens de sa satisfaction'.¹⁵⁰ As well as further encouraging identification between Houellebecq and his protagonist, his comments also reflect the ambiguity of language he has exploited within *La Possibilité d'une île*: 'il y a un certain ridicule à parler de "pédophilie" lorsqu'on a affaire à des filles de seize ou dix-sept ans (j'ai observé ce dérapage, plusieurs fois, au journal de TF1)'.¹⁵¹ He also accuses the editorial team at *L'Infini* of making a similarly imprecise use of language in the questions to which he responds.¹⁵² It is such ambiguity, particularly within the popular media, that Houellebecq exploits within his descriptions of Daniell's paedophilic desire.

This becomes more evident when we analyse how this ambiguity is provocatively deployed within the text. An illuminating example is provided by two similar descriptions of oral sex. The first is from *La Possibilité d'une île*, where Daniell celebrates the role of fellatio in pornographic movies:

La fellation est depuis toujours la figure reine des films pornos, la seule qui puisse servir de modèle utile aux jeunes filles; c'est aussi la seule où l'on retrouve parfois quelque chose de l'émotion réelle de l'acte, parce que c'est la seule où le gros plan soit, également, un gros plan du visage de la femme, où l'on puisse lire sur ses traits cette fierté joyeuse, ce ravissement enfantin qu'elle éprouve à donner du plaisir.¹⁵³

The 'jeunes filles' and 'enfantin' here clearly underline the narrator's paedophilic desire since they make an explicit link between childhood sexuality and adult pornography. An important comparison can be made with similar thoughts as attributed to Houellebecq writing under his own name in an essay that served as the preface to German artist Tomi Ungerer's collection of erotic drawings, and not previously considered by critics of

¹⁵⁰ Michel Houellebecq, 'La question pédophile', *L'Infini*, 59 (1997), pp. 96-98 (p. 96).

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹⁵² 'Le questionnaire entretient d'ailleurs cette ambiguïté en utilisant alternativement les termes de *mineur* et d'*enfant*'. *Ibid.* [italics in original text].

¹⁵³ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 200.

Houellebecq's work. In his preface to *Erotoscope*, published four years before *La Possibilité d'une île*, the same opinion is expressed about this pornographic trope in less provocative language:

Si la fellation est la figure reine du cinéma porno, ce n'est pas seulement parce que les hommes adorent cette caresse; c'est aussi que parfois, lorsque la caméra reste longtemps en gros plan sur le visage de la femme, captant à la fois son regard et les mouvements de sa langue, on sent passer quelque chose de son émotion, de sa gourmandise.¹⁵⁴

Houellebecq also subsequently stresses that in such films: 'on peut filmer la joie qui illumine les traits du visage de l'amante' during the act.¹⁵⁵ The opinion expressed in both extracts is the same in that the blowjob is the 'figure reine' of the genre, the absence of the child references in the earlier *Erotoscope* preface can clearly be seen to suggest a degree of intentional provocation through his references to children in the novel in what is an otherwise very similar extract. The comparison between the two extracts is additionally interesting for the insight it gives into Houellebecq's readiness to apparently re-work his own previously-published material into his fiction.¹⁵⁶ This is, of course, further encouragement to the reader to identify the character of Daniell with Houellebecq. Following the mediatised scandals surrounding the publication of *Plateforme*, it is possible to speculate that Houellebecq here, in his following text, is cynically striving, albeit ultimately unsuccessfully, to provoke a similar media storm through his provocatively ambiguous use of language.

7. *La Carte et le territoire* and authorship

When read in the context of his previous work, Houellebecq's fifth novel is particularly distinct from the perspective of narrative. As I have demonstrated above, all of his earlier fiction makes use of identifiable narrative voices. The omniscient narrating voice

¹⁵⁴ Houellebecq, 'Préface' in Tomi Ungerer, *Erotoscope*, p. 11.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ For more on how Houellebecq reworks his own previously published material into his fiction, specifically that published in the satirical newspaper *L'Idiot International* see Russell Williams, 'Houellebecq et *L'Idiot international*: la genèse d'une voix littéraire?', *L'Unité de l'œuvre de Michel Houellebecq*, ed. by Bruno Viard and Sabine van Wesemael (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014), pp. 337-349.

of *La Carte et le territoire*, however, is unidentifiable. Moreover, as Houellebecq's previous novels present the reader with glimpses of the text's author through explicit, implied or accidental authorial intervention, the absence of clearly-defined narrating voices here raises the possibility that the narrating voice of *La Carte et le territoire* is itself authorial. Authorial presence is also distinct in the novel through the presence of the character of 'Michel Houellebecq', the presentation of whom continues the interrogation of the author's media persona of *La Possibilité d'une île*. This section will consider that the 'Houellebecq' presented in this novel only partially reflects the public persona, and instead presents a more idealised avatar for the novelist. This section equally proposes a metatextual reading of the murder of Michel Houellebecq, which is dramatized in the text, which considers both authorship and the critical reception of Houellebecq's work.

La Carte et le territoire's omniscient third-person narrative is frequently focalized through Jed Martin, while the chapters exploring the investigation of Houellebecq's murder in the third section of the novel see focalization through police inspector Jasselin. Martin and Jasselin largely act as Genette's 'qui voit', but the identity of the text's overall narrator who presents the text's third-person perspective, 'qui parle', is more difficult to establish since it is not, unlike all of Houellebecq's previous narratives, tied to a precise moment of composition.

The narrative frequently and explicitly presents thoughts and attitudes that are to be attributed to Martin and Jasselin. It is also, however, regularly more ambiguous. Martin is, for example, acutely disengaged from the trends and discourses of contemporary media, 'l'intérêt en tout cas lui échappait totalement'.¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, although he has been a reader of philosophical texts: 'Jed ne se souvenait pas d'avoir acheté de sa vie, un journal ou un magazine'.¹⁵⁸ For this reason, the refocalization of

¹⁵⁷ Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 80.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

narrative perspective in the following extract which considers the critical reception of Martin's first solo art-exhibition is notable:

La critique était en effet, Jed s'en rendit compte en parcourant le dossier, exceptionnellement unanime dans la louange. Il arrive dans les sociétés contemporaines, malgré l'acharnement que mettent les journalistes à traquer et à repérer les modes en formation, voire si possible à les créer, que certaines d'entre elles se développent de manière anarchique, sauvage, et prospèrent avant d'avoir été nommées – cela arrive même en réalité de plus en plus souvent, depuis la diffusion massive d'Internet et l'effondrement concomitant des médias écrits.¹⁵⁹

The extract opens with a focalization through Jed's appreciation of the positive nature of the press coverage. The subsequent lines see a broadening of narrative focus and present a media-savvy consideration of the development of journalistic trends that clearly lie outside Martin's frame of reference. The text suggests a narrative voice, but it is not clear to what source these thoughts are to be attributed.

A similar movement of narrative refocalization from the specific character towards a broader and less conclusive perspective can be observed in the following extract where Jed Martin sees Olga after a number of years apart:

Jed s'immobilisa à quelques mètres d'elle. Deux bandes de tissu crème nouées derrière son cou, incrustées de petits cristaux, recouvraient ses seins et se rejoignaient à la hauteur du nombril, maintenues par une broche représentant un soleil en métal argenté, avant de s'attacher à une jupe courte et moulante, elle aussi parsemée de cristaux, qui laissait apercevoir l'attache d'un porte-jarretelles blanc. Ses bas, blancs eux aussi, étaient d'une finesse extrême. Le vieillissement, en particulier le vieillissement apparent, n'est nullement un processus continu, on peut plutôt caractériser la vie comme une succession de paliers, séparés par des chutes brusques. Lorsque nous rencontrons quelqu'un que nous avons perdu de vue depuis des années, nous avons parfois l'impression qu'il a pris un coup de vieux; nous avons parfois, au contraire, l'impression qu'il n'a pas changé. Impression fallacieuse – la dégradation, secrète, se fraye d'abord un chemin travers l'intérieur de l'organisme, avant d'éclater au grand jour.¹⁶⁰

There is a broadening of narrative focus here, but, as with the previous extract, there is a shift in the thought process it describes. The former saw Martin's appreciation of the press clippings give way to the narrative's confident analysis. Here Jed's initial impression of Olga's beauty again moves away from Jed's thoughts and is superseded

¹⁵⁹ Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 89.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

by a similar analysis of the ageing process before eventually refocalizing again on Jed as the paragraph concludes, firmly anchored by the ‘croyait-il’ of the subsequent sentence: ‘Depuis dix ans, Olga s’était maintenue sur un palier radieux de sa beauté – sans pourtant que cela n’ait suffi à la rendre heureuse. Lui non plus, croyait-il, n’avait pas tellement changé au cours de ces dix années’.¹⁶¹ Again, as in the previous extract, the attribution of the general aphorism about ageing is never clarified.

Elsewhere, the shifts within narrative focalization are more subtle. An extract drawn from Jed Martin and Olga’s visits to a fictional Parisian restaurant Chez Anthony et Georges illustrate this through another ambiguous use of *style indirect libre*.

Olga fut accueillie comme une habituée par Georges, maigre, chauve et vaguement inquiétant qui avait un peu un look d’ancien pédé cuir. Anthony, en cuisine, était bear sans excès – il devait probablement faire attention, mais sa carte trahissait une véritable obsession pour le foie gras. Jed les catalogua comme des pédés semi-modernes, soucieux d’éviter les excès et les fautes de goût classiquement associés à leur communauté mais, quand même, se lâchant un peu de temps en temps – au moment de l’arrivée d’Olga, Georges lui avait demandé: “Je prends ton manteau, ma chérie?”, insistant sur le *ma chérie* avec un ton très Michou.¹⁶²

The narrative here presents a number of judgements about the gay couple who run the restaurant that do not seem to be satisfactorily attributable to Martin, despite the text ostensibly presenting them from his narrative perspective. The assertion that Jed ‘les catalogua comme des pédés semi-modernes, soucieux d’éviter les excès et les fautes de goût classiquement associés à leur communauté’, associate him with sweeping lifestyle judgements about the gay community that seem atypical for the character. In addition, the fact that Georges’ comment to Olga is described in terms of ‘un ton très Michou’, with reference to the camp Parisian cabaret star, again suggests an awareness of the worlds of celebrity and media that is not perhaps easily reconcilable with Martin.

In the absence of a clearly defined narrator or fictional context for the writing of the text, to what source is the reader to attribute this narrative voice? Unlike

¹⁶¹ Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 241.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 66-67 [italics in original text].

Houellebecq's previous texts, the origin of such narrative judgements or narrative information is never explicitly defined within *La Carte et le territoire*. Despite this absence, there is however enough of a continuity with Houellebecq's previous texts in terms of narrative preoccupations – both larger themes and recurrent tropes – and literary style to allow close identification with them.¹⁶³ It is also possible to suggest the aphoristic style of such unattributed narrative intervention possess enough stylistic resonances with Houellebecq's earlier texts *Extension du domaine de la lutte*,¹⁶⁴ *Les Particules élémentaires*¹⁶⁵ and *Plateforme*¹⁶⁶ to suggest that this voice can be viewed as authorial.

Furthermore, the absence of the explicit description of the process of writing the text coincides with the presence of Houellebecq himself as protagonist. It is thus possible that the implicit void left by the source of narrative interventions within *La Carte et le territoire* is to be filled by the presence of the physical author, or at least his explicitly named avatar. The character Houellebecq is writing within the narrative, but this is explicitly 'une préface pour une réédition de Jean-Louis Curtis' or the preface for Jed Martin's art catalogue rather than fiction or a *récit* that can be equated with Daniell's efforts.¹⁶⁷

It is, however, possible to suggest that *La Carte et le territoire* can be read as a meta-fictional consideration of its own composition. It is notable, for example, that the

¹⁶³ These range from consistent references within Houellebecq's texts to daytime French television, such as Julien Lepers, presenter of quiz show *Questions pour un Champion*, who also appears in *Plateforme* (p. 52), and literary references such as Agatha Christie, who is a consistent reference in Houellebecq's work. These recurrences also include, for example more passing references, such as those of the eating habits of Chinese people within *La Carte et le territoire* (p. 102), as well as *Plateforme* (p. 111). More substantially, the narrative of *La Carte et le territoire* also displays a consistent degree of sociological observation, for example the respective conversation topics of males and females (p. 22), while, in particular, the narrative continues to demonstrate a preoccupation with the sexual economy as explored in his previous books, here focalized through Jasselin, *Ibid.*, pp. 303-304.

¹⁶⁴ Such as 'l'achat d'un lit, de nos jours, présente effectivement des difficultés considérables'. Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 101.

¹⁶⁵ For example: 'Les histoires d'argent et de rapport qualité-prix intéressent toujours beaucoup les hommes, c'est chez eux un trait caractéristique'. Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 317.

¹⁶⁶ Such as 'C'est dans le rapport à autrui qu'on prend conscience de soi; c'est bien ce qui rend le rapport à autrui insupportable'. Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, p. 94.

¹⁶⁷ Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 168.

literary pronouncements that the fictional Houellebecq makes in the novel can be attributed to *La Carte et le territoire* itself. He favours literature that is ‘*authentique drame humain*’, a critical assessment that can clearly be made of the novel.¹⁶⁸ Additionally, Houellebecq declares he is less interested in literary narration than he is in ‘juxtaposition’. The latter technique can be observed abundantly within Houellebecq’s writing, as noted above and in this text, since the novel juxtaposes an ‘*authentique drame humain*’ with a *roman policier* subsequently to Houellebecq’s murder. Houellebecq’s sentences also frequently juxtapose the banal with incongruent description.¹⁶⁹

Houellebecq’s position as overall narrative voice of *La Carte et le territoire* is also suggested by an incident that occurs when Martin is visiting the writer. Martin’s mind wanders, recalling an incident with Olga where she praises his ‘regard intense. Un regard passionné’.¹⁷⁰ Martin recognises a similar ‘regard’ in the Houellebecq facing him who has however ‘devenu indifférent à tout ce qui pouvait s’apparenter à une relation amoureuse, et vraisemblablement aussi à toute relation humaine’.¹⁷¹ In the following paragraph, however, Houellebecq apparently divines these thoughts: “‘C’est vrai, je n’éprouve qu’un faible sentiment de solidarité à l’égard de l’espèce humaine...” dit Houellebecq comme s’il avait deviné ses pensées’. Houellebecq’s surprising ability to read minds could, of course, be read as suggesting the growing affinity between the two men. It also suggests that Houellebecq himself possesses a degree of authorial

¹⁶⁸ Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 173 [italics in original text].

¹⁶⁹ Examples abound in *La Carte et le territoire*: on considering the occupation of his estate agent, Jed reminisces: ‘Il s’était alors dit qu’il aurait dû être agent immobilier, ou gynécologue’, p. 16. Equally on crossing Paris’s thirteenth arrondissement he observes: ‘La rue Jeanne d’Arc descendait jusqu’au boulevard Vincent-Auriol, que surplombait le métro aérien; au loin, on apercevait le dôme du Panthéon’, p. 212. Finally a consideration of the euthanasia clinic where his father has decided to end his life is juxtaposed with the local fish life: ‘Pas du tout en raison de ses activités, au contraire les écologistes en question se réjouissaient de l’existence de *Dignitas*, ils se déclaraient même entièrement solidaires de son combat; mais la quantité de cendres et d’ossements humains qu’ils déversaient dans les eaux du lac était selon eux excessive, et avait l’inconvénient de favoriser une espèce de carpe brésilienne, récemment arrivée en Europe, au détriment de l’omble chevalier, et plus généralement des poissons locaux, p. 368.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

omniscient vision, implying that the fictional author does indeed have a degree of influence over the text of *La Carte et le territoire* itself.

7a. ‘Michel Houellebecq’ – a partial portrait of the author as an old man

La Carte et le territoire can be read as an interrogation of Houellebecq’s media persona since it appears, not without a touch of humour, to dramatize it. As Jed Martin remarks to the author: ‘j’ai l’impression que vous jouez un peu votre propre rôle...’, an observation that suggests the Houellebecq within the novel is an embodiment of the idea of the author, or a ‘houellebecquian’ stereotype as constructed through media.¹⁷² This image of Houellebecq, however, is idealised and is lacking in the elements that would make it a fully-drawn caricature of Houellebecq within media. Notably, it forms a striking point of comparison with the leering, misogynistic Islamophobe of *La Possibilité d’une île*.

The image presented of Houellebecq in *La Carte et le territoire* considers his literary reputation, his social relationships (or perhaps more accurately his general lack of them) and his appearance. From the perspective of literature the social vision of his work and its readability are praised by Jed’s father: ‘C’est un bon auteur, il me semble. C’est agréable à lire, et il a une vision assez juste de la société’.¹⁷³ Socially, Houellebecq is presented as an unpleasant recluse who only maintains cordial relations with his dog: ‘De notoriété publique Houellebecq était un solitaire à fortes tendances misanthropiques, c’est à peine s’il adressait la parole à son chien’.¹⁷⁴ As media reports about the physical author support, he is twice divorced and estranged from his only son,¹⁷⁵ lived in Ireland during the writing of *La Carte et le territoire* and has invested in

¹⁷² Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 146.

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 128. Houellebecq’s dog Clément was an ever present subject of conversation in media interviews with the author up until the canine’s death in 2011. An Arte TV interview with Laure Adler, for example, featured the dog as a constant presence. Olivier Wicker, ‘Professeur Houellebecq’, *Libération*, 30 September 2005, p. 24.

¹⁷⁵ Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 311. Many media reports have explored Houellebecq’s family circumstances such as Joffrey Boilée, ‘Quand Michel Houellebecq répareit des ordis’,

Spanish property. Whereas media speculated his choice of Ireland was for tax reasons,¹⁷⁶ the fictional Houellebecq has, somewhat ironically, been financially ruined by both the divorce and the implications of Spanish planning regulation.¹⁷⁷

Houellebecq's supposed lifestyle is also reflected in the text. He is a chain-smoker,¹⁷⁸ and after initially being introduced as a relatively cheerful, moderate drinker,¹⁷⁹ becomes an antisocial alcoholic,¹⁸⁰ unhealthy and described as 'une vieille tortue malade'.¹⁸¹ Most striking, and self-deriding, is the smell: 'ses cheveux étaient ébouriffés et sales, son visage rouge, presque couperosé et il puait un peu'.¹⁸² Houellebecq is equally associated in the text both with his ever-present parka, and trips to Thai brothels.¹⁸³

There are, however, elements to the description of Houellebecq that do not fit as closely to the media persona, or the depiction of the physical Houellebecq and challenge Morrey's assertion that this portrayal is 'in many respects [...] an honest and accurate one, at least based on the impression we, as readers, have of the man from interviews, profiles and television appearances'.¹⁸⁴ These include the fact the fictional Houellebecq

L'Express.fr, 23 July 2010 <http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/1990-quand-michel-houellebecq-reparait-des-ordis_907917.html>, [accessed 5 March 2013].

¹⁷⁶ Jean-Claude Hazera, 'Pauvre Houellebecq', *Les Echos*, 4 July 2005

<http://www.lesechos.fr/04/07/2005/LesEchos/19448-205-ECH_pauvre-houellebecq.htm> [accessed 5 March 2013].

¹⁷⁷ 'En principe il s'en fout de l'argent, il vit avec que dalle; mais son divorce l'a complètement séché. En plus, il avait acheté des appartements en Espagne au bord de la mer qui vont être expropriés sans indemnité à cause d'une loi de protection du littoral à effet rétroactif – un truc de dingues. En réalité, je crois qu'il est un peu gêné en ce moment – c'est incroyable, non, avec tout ce qu'il a pu gagner? Donc, voilà: si vous lui proposez pas mal d'argent, je pense que vous avez vos chances'. Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 131.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁷⁹ Jed asserts: 'Vous avez la réputation d'être très dépressif. Je croyais par exemple que vous buviez beaucoup plus'. *Ibid.*, p. 146

¹⁸⁰ Houellebecq hoche la tête, écartant les bras comme s'il entrait dans une transe tantrique – il était, plus probablement, ivre, et tentait d'assurer son équilibre sur le tabouret de cuisine où il s'était accroupi'. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹⁸³ 'Depuis, début avril, je vais en Thaïlande et j'y reste jusqu'à la fin août [...] les bordels tournent au ralenti mais ils sont quand même ouverts et ça me va, ça me convient, les prestations restent excellentes ou très bonnes'. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

¹⁸⁴ Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, p. 100.

claims he has never written a preface for an art monograph,¹⁸⁵ when his physical counterpart has actually published prefaces for catalogues of the work of German artists Tomi Ungerer and Thomas Ruff as well as the American artist Jeff Koons.¹⁸⁶ Equally, Jed's assertion that Houellebecq has a well-known 'haine bien ancrée à l'encontre des photographes' does not necessary tally with his readiness to dress as a scientist for the August 1998 cover of *Les Inrockuptibles* or indeed to pose shirtless for the same publication in November 2010.¹⁸⁷

The text's explicit presentation of its author's relationship with the French press is interesting since it is suggested with a degree of hyperbole that does not necessarily accurately reflect the real state of affairs. In Jasselin's investigation, he learns that the author had 'beaucoup d'ennemis', although it is clarified by his fictional editor and Beigbeder that these are of a purely literary nature.¹⁸⁸ Prior to his murder, Houellebecq makes the observation to Martin that: 'je suis vraiment détesté par les médias français, vous savez, à un point incroyable; il ne se passe pas de semaine sans que je ne me fasse chier sur la gueule par telle ou telle publication'.¹⁸⁹ The physical Houellebecq has expressed similar thoughts to his fictional counterpart in his published exchanges with philosopher Bernard-Henri Levi.¹⁹⁰ Houellebecq has never held an entirely uncritical relationship with the French press, yet such a declaration ignores the consistent support he has received from publications including *Le Monde* and *Les Inrockuptibles*.

¹⁸⁵ Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 140.

¹⁸⁶ These are: Houellebecq, 'Préface' in Tomi Ungerer, *Erotoscope*; 'Cléopâtre 2000', in Thomas Ruff, *Nudes* (New York: Harry N Abrams, 2003), pp. xiii-xv and 'Jeff Koons par Michel Houellebecq, in Jeff Koons, *Versailles* (Paris: Xavier Barral, 2008), pp. 15-21. Strictly speaking, only the introduction to the Ungerer catalogue can be correctly described as a conventional preface: the piece for the Ruff catalogue is an apparently autobiographical text (and described as a short story) while the Koons catalogue includes the transcript of Houellebecq's interview with the artist originally conducted for *Art World* magazine.

¹⁸⁷ Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 162.

¹⁸⁸ 'Curieusement, lui et son éditrice m'ont répété la même chose: il avait beaucoup d'ennemis'. *Ibid.*, p. 311.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹⁹⁰ In *Ennemis publics*, Houellebecq compares the irritation he is caused by some members of the French press with a medical condition: 'Mes vésicules eczémateuses se nomment Pierre Assouline, Didier Jacob, François Busnel, Pierre Mérot, Denis Demonpion, Éric Naulleau, tant d'autres, j'ai oublié le nom de celui du *Figaro*, je ne sais plus très bien, j'ai fini par renoncer à compter mes ennemis alors que je n'ai toujours pas, malgré les avis répétés du médecin, renoncé à mes séances de grattage'. Houellebecq and Lévy, *Ennemis publics*, pp. 14-15.

Another key difference between the fictional Houellebecq in *La Carte et le territoire* and his media representation is the complete lack of scandal: there is no sex, misogyny, racism or hostility towards Islam. While Houellebecq, as noted above, is briefly described as misanthropic, there is no reference to his work's constant provocation, resulting in a somewhat sanitized or idealised image of the author. Whereas the real Houellebecq has been critically criticised for his misogyny, his fictional avatar only has positive relationships with women,¹⁹¹ many of whom feel 'une grande tendresse' for the writer.¹⁹² Alongside the sex within *Les Particules élémentaires*, *Plateforme* and *La Possibilité d'une île* for which Houellebecq's work is known, which apart from the brief reference to Thai brothels noted above is absent from the depiction of the fictional Houellebecq. Islam is also conspicuous by its absence. Since the depiction of Houellebecq in *La Carte et le territoire* appears largely drawn from the 'Houellebecquian' stereotype as presented through media, this is surprising given the high amount of media coverage Houellebecq received in relation to the post-*Plateforme* media *affaire* and surprisingly not suggested as a possible motive for his murder by those investigating the crime. In presenting such a partial caricature of Houellebecq which draws both on astute observation and surprising omissions, *La Carte et le territoire* appears to be both an acknowledgement of the public persona of the author and what appears to concurrently be an attempt to criticise or revise it.

7b. The 'death' of the author

This preoccupation with Houellebecq's media persona is particularly interesting when read within the context of Houellebecq's murder. The crime instigates the final third of the text's homage to the *roman policier* genre which will be considered in detail in the following chapter. His bloody assassination can also clearly be read as a further critical

¹⁹¹ As Baggesgaard has noted, 'On a souvent accusé Michel Houellebecq de misogynie et d'objectivation du corps féminin'. Mads Anders Baggesgaard, 'Les cops en vue – trois images du corps chez Michel Houellebecq' in *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, pp. 241-252 (p. 241).

¹⁹² Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 336.

comment in relation to his public figure. It operates as a broad symbol for the critical reception of Houellebecq's work, but can also be seen to function as a form of literary 'suicide' that represents a more subtle interrogation of what Houellebecq perceives as how he and his work are received. While Daniell's *récit* seems to express an authorial desire for literary longevity, Houellebecq's murder seems a comment on, or a killing off of, a certain media-led idea of the author.

Houellebecq's murder in *La Carte et le territoire* can firstly be read on the level of a somewhat inelegant metaphor for what the author understands as how his work is perceived by media critics. In such a reading, his murderer Adolphe Petissaud, an aristocratic aficionado of the canonical 'high art' represented by the Francis Bacon within his collection, is a critic of Houellebecq's work, an art lover physically tearing him apart in what is effectively a metaphor for an aggressive critical attack. The murder can be read as Houellebecq bemoaning a lack of serious critical appreciation: Petissaud becomes the manifestation of one of the literary enemies identified by Beigbeder later in the text, as noted above. The artistic, methodological approach he has taken to his murderous work can be read as a piece of criticism that values itself at the literal expense of its subject.¹⁹³

While Houellebecq's murderer is identified, there are a number of suggestions that complicate this identification since it appears that the character had anticipated his death, if not deliberately staged it as a form of bizarre suicide. The text reveals, for example, that Houellebecq was preparing for the end: he had returned to his childhood home and even taken to sleeping in his childhood bed. Prior to his death, the author had also converted to Christianity, purchased a burial plot at the Montparnasse cemetery and

¹⁹³ An alternative reading of Houellebecq's murder has been proposed by Viard who has interpreted it as Damien Hirst's 'revenge' for Martin's attack on his representation in his own painting, considered above: 'il est facile de reconnaître la manière habituelle de Hirst, spécialiste du trash et du macabre [...]. Le maître du morbide a simplement remplacé une œuvre (le tableau à l'huile) par une autre de sa façon (l'installation de chair humaine). Pas besoin de signature!'. Bruno Viard, '*La Carte et le Territoire*, roman de la représentation: entre trash et tradition', *Lendemains*, 36: 142-143 (2011), 87-95 (p. 92).

oversaw the creation of a headstone. Equally, the character's super-secure Internet connection, the reasons for which baffled police, is never fully explained within the text, and suggests an unexplored subtext.¹⁹⁴

As the following chapter will suggest, the revelation of the murderer is somewhat unsatisfactory when read from the perspective of the *roman policier* which perhaps additionally implies some degree of collusion between the murderer and his victim. It would be a step too far to read Houellebecq's death in *La Carte et le territoire* as a suicide, but there is an interesting metonymic relationship in an author 'murdering' his own avatar within writing. This assumes a greater critical importance when read within the context of his previous poetry and prose which, as noted in the second chapter of this thesis, consistently presents images of self-harm. Equally, the suicides of characters are also frequent within Houellebecq's novels.¹⁹⁵ In essence, *La Carte et le territoire* presents a form of literary suicide where the writer, or at least an idea of the writer, is killed off by the writer himself.

In this way, one of the major themes of the text, as suggested by the novel's title is revealing. *La Carte et le territoire* has been read in terms of the picture it presents of contemporary France in a globalised age where the existing relationship between ('le territoire') and the idea of it ('la carte') needs to be re-evaluated. The death of Houellebecq can be read along similar lines.¹⁹⁶ We can thus propose a reading of his murder along similar ones, that identifies the symbolic death of what Houellebecq perceives is his media persona or public image. In killing an idea of Houellebecq this would perhaps suggest the continuity of an essential Michel Houellebecq whose voice is

¹⁹⁴ Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 308.

¹⁹⁵ The ambiguous fates of the narrator and Tisserand in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* both suggest suicide. Michel, Christiane and Annabelle kill themselves in *Les Particules élémentaires*. Both Daniell and Isabelle kill themselves in *La Possibilité d'une île* and elsewhere in *La Carte et le territoire*, Jed Martin's father ends his life in an assisted suicide.

¹⁹⁶ For example: 'Sous l'effet de la mondialisation, la France est devenue marchandise, voilà le propos de *La Carte*. Ce propos est simplificateur mais significatif. Cette anticipation sur les années 2020 reste une anticipation. Si le territoire est frelaté, on comprend pourquoi la carte vaut mieux: son symbolisme et sa schématisation édulcorent ce que l'enquête de terrain fait découvrir'. Bruno Viard, '*La Carte et le Territoire*, roman de la représentation: entre trash et tradition', p. 91.

then free to complete the narration of the text.

It is perhaps too soon to conclude of this literary ‘suicide’ is most appropriately read as a broader statement about Houellebecq’s relationship with his art or a declaration of intent on the part of the narrator. In media interviews surrounding the publication of *La Carte et le territoire*, for example, Houellebecq suggested that the novel could be his last, which if happened could naturally be reconciled with his literary death.¹⁹⁷ The start of 2013 saw the physical author both mirror the behaviour of his fictional counterpart and relocate from Ireland back to France as well as publishing *Configuration du dernier rivage*, his first collection of poetry since 1999’s *Renaissance. Soumission*, Houellebecq’s sixth novel was published early in 2015, but has not yet been fully considered by serious critics of his work: Houellebecq’s novelistic trajectory following his literary ‘death’ remain to be seen.

8. Conclusion

This chapter has, through a systematic consideration of the complexities of narrative perspective in his novels, suggested that, while it is filtered through conventions of literature – narrators and characters – authorial voice is both a complex and problematic notion with regards to Houellebecq’s fiction and is a stylistic hallmark of his writing. In particular, an understanding of the figure of the implied author is crucial for a full critical appreciation of his work. While the previous chapter demonstrated how his novels strive to evoke the emotional engagement of the reader, this chapter has considered how such engagement is fundamentally unstable and congruently enhanced and complicated, even undermined, through traces of ambiguous authorial presence in his work. It is frequently unclear whether such traces are intentional or to be regarded as lapses of Houellebecq’s narrative technique, particularly in *Les Particules élémentaires*, whether the posthuman perspective of the narrator is undermined, and through

¹⁹⁷ In response to a question from Nelly Kapriélian from *Les Inrockuptibles*, Houellebecq remarked he could envisage stopping writing after *La Carte et le territoire*. Nelly Kapriélian, ‘Houellebecq: “Ce livre sera peut-être mon dernier”’, *Les Inrockuptibles*, 8 November 2010.

Plateforme's consistent critique of Islam. This chapter has also highlighted how this process is further problematized in Houellebecq's later fiction which appears to foreground and encourage at least partial identification with the paratextual image of Houellebecq himself as constructed through contemporary media, reaching its apex in the grisly murder of the author.

Chapter four – Houellebecq and the *roman policier*

1. Introduction

Critical approaches to Michel Houellebecq's work frequently look to situate his writing within the French literary canon. As discussed in the above introduction to the present study, such efforts are conducted in particular through the prism of nineteenth-century thought and writing. Sandrine Schianno-Bennis notes the 'relents dix-neuviémistes' within his work,¹ while Rabosseau describes him as 'un romancier "néo-naturaliste"', 'largement influencé [...] par Zola'.² Julia Pröll explores his poems with the aim of establishing 'une filiation littéraire menant de Baudelaire à Houellebecq', which I have equally considered above.³ Other critics have sought to situate Houellebecq's work within the context of equally canonical twentieth-century French writing. Bardolle, for example, explores similarities in Houellebecq's approach to that of Céline and Proust and Jean-Louis Cornille, among others, stresses the direct intertextual links that can be observed between Houellebecq's fiction and Camus' *L'Étranger*.⁴

Such approaches are a clearly rewarding way of approaching Houellebecq's writing. Their validity is reinforced both in the way Houellebecq's fiction suggests a wide reading of French canonical literature and his remarks in interview where he has frequently declared his lineage with forebears such as Balzac, Zola and Baudelaire. These approaches, however, risk overshadowing the fact that Houellebecq does not exclusively draw on the established literary canon within his writing. This critical lacuna has been provocatively expressed by Bowd: 'the frequency of comparisons to Baudelaire, Balzac, Proust, Zola and Camus could [...] be seen as a sign of fundamental insecurity: the author of *Les Particules élémentaires* must be seen as part of the canon

¹ Sandrine Schianno-Bennis, 'Relents dix-neuviémistes dans l'œuvre de Michel Houellebecq' in *Le Monde de Houellebecq*, pp. 129-142.

² Sandrine Rabosseau, 'Michel Houellebecq, un romancier "néo-naturaliste"', in *Le Monde de Houellebecq*, pp. 105-113 (p. 105).

³ Julia Pröll, 'La poésie urbaine de Michel Houellebecq: sur les pas de Charles Baudelaire?', p. 53.

⁴ Bardolle, *La Littérature à vif*; Jean-Louis Cornille, 'Extension du domaine de la littérature ou J'ai lu *L'Étranger*', in *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, pp. 133-144.

in order to avoid the critic's marginalization within the academic field, especially in France'.⁵

For all of the canonical 'relents' in Houellebecq's work, his writing is equally infused with implicit and explicit references to distinctly uncanonical texts, even those that sit outside the conventionally literary. The narrator of *Plateforme*, for example, maintains a consistent dialogue with Routard travel guides throughout his holiday. Both *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *Les Particules élémentaires* make use of the language of contemporary advertising,⁶ while *La Possibilité d'une île* refers to *Radikal* hip-hop magazine, among a wide-range of contemporary media.⁷ Houellebecq's writing also displays an ongoing interest in writing at the fringes of the literary or what Alain-Michel Boyer has described as 'paralittérature', 'l'ensemble des livres de fiction dont la diffusion est massive, et que le discours critique, le plus fréquemment, ne considère pas, ou pas encore, comme appartenant à la littérature'.⁸ This interest goes further than Houellebecq's homage to Lovecraft. Wendy Michallat, for example, demonstrates how '*Les Particules [élémentaires]* draws on discourses and tropes prevalent in the popular youth press of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s', and displays how influences can be mapped from publications including *Hara-Kiri*.⁹ *Plateforme* includes a recurrent critical appreciation of the 'best-seller anglo-saxon merdique' typified by Frederick Forsyth as well as the thrillers of John Grisham and David G. Balducci.¹⁰ *Les Particules élémentaires* details Bruno and Michel's avid readership of a range of texts including

⁵ Gavin Bowd, Review of *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe* in *French Studies*, 63:1 (2009), p. 114.

⁶ In the former, the words of an advertising jingle are noted on the narrator's visit to a department store: 'Nouvelles Galeries, aujourd'hui... Chaque jour est un nouveau jour...'. Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 67. In the latter, a slogan associated with the 3 Suisses catalogue will be crucial to Michel's successful vision to bring about the genetic modification of humanity: 'Optimisme, générosité, complicité, harmonie font avancer le monde. DEMAIN SERA FÉMININ'. Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 153.

⁷ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 48.

⁸ Alain-Michel Boyer, *Les Paralittératures* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2008), pp. 7-8. As examples, Boyer details: 'les romans sentimentaux ou roses; les romans d'épouvante et d'horreur; les romans d'espionnage; les romans de science fiction ou policiers [...]; les romans de cape et d'épée [...]; les westerns'. Ibid., p. 8.

⁹ Wendy Michallat, 'Modern life is still rubbish. Houellebecq and the refiguring of 'reactionary' retro', *Journal of European Studies*, 37: 3 (2007), 313-331 (p. 315).

¹⁰ Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, pp. 38, 95 & 97.

bande-dessinée featuring the character ‘Pif-le-Chien’ and literature for children including the *Club des Cinq* series and Paul-Jacques Bonzon’s *Les Six compagnons et l’homme au gant*.¹¹

As noted above, Houellebecq’s work has been critically considered from the perspective of more liminal genre by Dion and Haghebaert who suggest how *Les Particules élémentaires* has been ‘reçu comme la réactivation de genres inacceptables ou scandaleusement désuets’ and folds the characteristics of a wide range of different forms of writing into its narrative.¹² For Dion and Haghebaert this demonstrates what they have described as Houellebecq’s ‘poétique des genres’,¹³ where the overall genre of Houellebecq’s novel is consistently undermined by other forms of writing through ‘bifurcations qui menacent sans arrêt de faire dérailler le récit’.¹⁴ Dion and Haghebaert associate this process with ‘une mode de résistance’ to the ‘discours faussement unificateurs’ of contemporary society.¹⁵

It is true that similarities with ‘le roman porno, le roman à thèse [et] le roman expérimental à la Zola’ can be located within Houellebecq’s writing,¹⁶ but one genre, detective fiction, is an important and consistent point of reference for his work.¹⁷ As this

¹¹ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, pp. 42 & 141.

¹² Dion and Haghebaert, ‘Le Cas de Michel Houellebecq et la dynamique des genres littéraires’, p. 510.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 512.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 520.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 521.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 510.

¹⁷ Houellebecq’s relationship with genre fiction has yet to be fully considered. The genre most explored by critics is science fiction since, as Van Wesemael has suggested, ‘Houellebecq utilise la science fiction comme moyen d’expression parmi beaucoup d’autres au sein d’un projet plus large’, *Michel Houellebecq: La Plaisir du texte*, p. 84. Van Wesemael (pp. 87-88), along with Clément, *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, pp. 94-95, stresses the influence of Clifford D. Simak’s *City on Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *Les Particules élémentaires*, a point reinforced by the author himself in interview, Houellebecq, “‘Je crois peu en la liberté’. Entretien’, *Perpendiculaire*, p. 7. Ni Loinsigh has stressed the ‘predictability’ of the bestseller genre in reference to the narrator’s reading material in *Plateforme* and argued that ‘Houellebecq seems to revel in confirming the prejudices associated with this type of literature’, Aedín Ní Loinsigh, ‘Tourist Traps Confounding Expectations in Michel Houellebecq’s *Plateforme*’, (p. 81) and suggests it reinforces the stereotype of the tourist throughout the novel. The relationship between Houellebecq’s work and pornographic fiction has been considered by a number of critics including Martin Ryle (Martin Ryle, ‘Surplus Consciousness: Houellebecq’s Novels of Ideas’, *Radical Philosophy*, 126, 2004, 23-32 (p. 27) and Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, p. 14. It is also possible to observe characteristics of the female oriented *roman rose* within much of Houellebecq’s writing. Boyer (*Les Paralittératures*, p. 66), suggests how a trope of the genre, popularised by the Harlequin publishing house sees a young, single female ‘rescued’ from a lowly status by a successful, socially superior beau.

chapter will suggest, an appreciation of this preoccupation enables us to consider how Houellebecq's work is composed of both explicit and implicit references to the roman *policier genre* which has yet to be considered to any significant extent by his critics. Indeed, as I shall argue in this chapter, a major parallel between Houellebecq's work and the *polar* is how the detective novel operates through the emotional engagement of the reader which is an important element of Houellebecq's work as I have established throughout this study.

In this chapter I firstly return briefly to the work of Jean Cohen and consider how his work explicitly addresses the *roman policier*. Cohen stresses how the genre creates a distinctive poetic mood which contributes to a reader's 'pathétique' engagement with and enjoyment of a text. I will suggest how Houellebecq approaches a comparable mood within his own writing. Subsequently, I will consider the extent to which Houellebecq's novels can be read from the perspective of how they both recall the *roman policier*, in terms of plot, mood and what I describe as the investigative spirit that pervades Houellebecq's work. I then consider *La Carte et le territoire* in detail which contains Houellebecq's most explicit and sustained references to the detective fiction genre. In particular, I suggest that a textual reference to crime writer Thierry Jonquet encourages us to read the final pages of Houellebecq's novel as a literary tribute to the former's work, in particular his novel *Mygale* (1995). Concluding this chapter, I will consider how, in a movement that recalls how the figure of the implied author is complicated as discussed above, Houellebecq's texts crucially undermine their relationship with the *polar*. I will suggest that detective fiction more conventionally presents an 'optimistic' vision which is subverted in Houellebecq's work in a way that mirrors his overriding pessimism.

Arguably, such a situation is reversed in Houellebecq's writing through the relationships of Bruno/Christiane, Michel/Valérie and Jed/Olga, but a fuller consideration of these forms of writing will not be provided by the present study.

2. The *roman policier*: ‘une phrase sans sujet’

As considered above, Cohen’s theoretical approach mainly strives to define the specific qualities of poetry and poetic language. In *Le Haut langage*, however, he broadens his approach and considers what he describes as the ‘puissance poétique’ of prose fiction.¹⁸

Cohen makes a number of observations about the *roman policier*, particularly concerning what he describes as its distinctive mood. This section will consider how a similar effect emerges in Houellebecq’s writing. Cohen considers the *polar* in terms of the ‘poétique’ effect it can create on the reader and describes techniques that bring about ‘la pathétisation du texte’.¹⁹ This is something Houellebecq has noted in terms that recall Cohen’s analysis: ‘Pour moi, les romans policiers d’énigme deviennent très poétiques lorsqu’ils arrivent au point où tout le monde peut être coupable, où le danger peut être partout, où la raison est radicalement désorientée’.²⁰

Cohen is particularly concerned with how detective fiction engages the reader’s emotion through the mood of mystery or suspense a successful *polar* generates. Cohen describes a typical *roman policier*, such as those written by Agatha Christie or Arthur Conan Doyle, as ‘une immense ellipse’ since crucial narrative information,²¹ is withheld from the reader until the final pages of the text in what amounts to a ‘défi intellectuel lancé par l’auteur au lecteur’.²² Using the same distinctions between ‘prosaic’ and ‘poetic’ language considered previously, Cohen notes that whilst it is in many ways a prosaic genre which posits a ‘défi intellectuel’, the *roman policier* has a ‘poétique’ effect on the reader since the textual ambiguity brings about his or her emotional ‘enchantement’. This resonates with the ‘émerveillement’ noted by Houellebecq within Lovecraft as noted above, but it disappears once the crime is solved: ‘avec la solution

¹⁸ Cohen, *Le Haut langage*, p. 250.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 253.

²⁰ Josyane Savigneau, ‘Michel Houellebecq: “Tout ce que la science permet sera réalisé”’ (para. 30 of 35).

²¹ Cohen, *Le Haut langage*, p. 252.

²² Ibid., p. 248.

s'en va l'enchantement. La clarté finale dissipe le mystère et en même temps l'efficace du roman'.²³ The tone of the *polar* thus moves back from the poetic to the prosaic.

This emotionally engaging effect has also been noted by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac: 'le véritable roman policier nous prend par la curiosité, une curiosité blessée et douloureuse mais, dans cette mesure même, agréable parce que l'espérance d'un dénouement satisfaisant la soutient et l'excite sans répit'.²⁴ Robinson has also referenced the emotional potential of detective fiction: 'It would be an unsuccessful detective story that did not make us curious and suspenseful about what is going to happen', stressing that there is an ambiguous mix of intellectual curiosity and emotional tension at work in the genre.²⁵ In addition, David Platten has speculated that a *polar* can be both intellectually and emotionally engaging: 'If there is a secret to the success of this literary genre [...] it may lie in the nature of the reader's highly sensitised engagement with a text that might prompt (simultaneously) rapid, emotional responses and cool, intellectual deliberation'.²⁶

The emotional investment of a reader in a *polar* is accentuated by what Cohen describes as the typical text's 'structure totalisante'.²⁷ This deepens the atmosphere of mystery in a text such as Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* (1939) since it casts all of the protagonists as suspects, creating what he describes as a 'univers du soupçon'.²⁸ This contributes to the 'pathétique' atmosphere of a detective novel since the process sees the 'espace romanesque' become 'totalement unifié'.²⁹ Cohen thus describes the effect on the novel in spatial terms since it becomes 'un lieu narrative

²³ Cohen, *Le Haut langage*, p. 249.

²⁴ Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac, *Le Roman policier* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994), pp. 33-34.

²⁵ Robinson, *Deeper Than Reason*, p. 136.

²⁶ David Platten, *The Pleasures of Crime* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), p. 12.

²⁷ Cohen, *Le Haut langage*, p. 251. In the above introduction, I have noted above Cohen's highlighting of the 'totalising' power of poetic language, an effect here extended to detective fiction.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

érigé en monde total fermé sur lui-même'.³⁰ This atmosphere is heightened by the 'loi d'isolation' which establishes an isolated or liminal setting where the narrative plays out, as in Christie's novel, which takes place on a remote island or *The Hollow* (1946), a text referenced in *Plateforme*, equally set in an isolated country house.³¹

Cohen stresses the overall tone of 'obscurité' that is typical of the *polar* and asserts it is 'la loi du genre et son ressort poétique unique'.³² Cohen describes this obscurity in terms of the narrative information that is withheld from the reader as well as the overall mood of obscurity that is often typical of genre fiction more broadly. He notes, for example, how 'Le roman policier, le film d'épouvante, le roman ou film fantastique n'introduisent pas le destinataire à un danger précis et localisé, mais à la peur sentie comme atmosphère, comme une sorte de qualité répandue à la surface du monde'.³³ Such an atmosphere is also accentuated through the blurring of narrative information and is also typically accentuated by means of pathetic fallacy such as the dense fog of Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901) or the incessant storms of Christie's *And Then There Were None*. Cohen stresses how, both in literature and lived experience, how such an 'effet de voile' can enhance a sense of 'puissance poétique' since it 'dissout les forms, exténue les couleurs [et] noie les différences'.³⁴ For Cohen, when perception within writing and experience becomes blurred or indistinct, his vocabulary includes 'flou', 'vague' and 'vaporeux', the potential emerges for it to be read or experienced poetically. He clarifies that there are 'deux structures de champ, l'une totalisante et indifférencié, qui est le corrélat phénoménal de la connaissance affective, tandis que l'autre, distincte et oppositive, constitue le corrélat de la

³⁰ Cohen, *Le Haut langage*, p. 250.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 255. It is important to note that the evocation of 'peur' within a reader was also noted by Houellebecq in Lovecraft's writing as considered above.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

connaissance conceptuelle'.³⁵ Understanding can thus be conceptual or 'prosaic' in terms of distinctness or more suggestive, poetic and 'pathétique' as characterised by the effect of the detective novel.³⁶

3. Houellebecq's novels: 'la peur sentie comme atmosphère'

Robitaille is rare among critics of Houellebecq's fiction since he has described the overall mood it creates. In particular, he has noted the unsettling or mysterious 'sentiment d'étrangeté' that pervades *Extension du domaine de la lutte* as noted above.³⁷ For Robitaille, this mood is attributable to the narrator/protagonist's uncomfortable place within society since he notes 'deux positions très précises: la position mélancolique et dépressive du narrateur, d'une part, et la position "machinistique" de la société occidentale contemporaine dans laquelle il évolue, d'autre part'.³⁸ It is also possible to suggest that this 'sentiment d'étrangeté', that resonates with Cohen's 'pathétique' mood, or what he has noted as 'la peur sentie comme atmosphère', pervades Houellebecq's fiction more broadly. This clearly suggests the protagonist's alienation, as Robitaille suggests, but the mood can also be described in terms of how it is the product of techniques that resonate with what Cohen has identified in the *roman policier*.

While they are not, on the whole, to be received primarily as detective fiction, all of Houellebecq's novels can however be read in terms of their obscure 'mystères' or narrative lacunae and how they go at least some way towards establishing a similar 'enchantement' or 'peur sentie comme atmosphère' to that highlighted by Cohen. A

³⁵ Cohen, *Le Haut langage*, p. 259.

³⁶ While Cohen uses the work of Agatha Christie to illustrate his theory, her work is also an important point of reference for Houellebecq's fiction. The author makes explicit references to the English writer and her work in *Plateforme*, *La Possibilité d'une île* and *La Carte et le territoire*, but Houellebecq's interest in Christie's writing has been little-considered by critics of his work. My consideration of Christie here considers parallels can be drawn in terms of the poetic mood in the work of both writers. Houellebecq's explicit citation of Christie celebrates how her novels, perhaps surprisingly, evoke pathos through their realistic characterisation which will not be considered in the present study for the sake of brevity.

³⁷ Robitaille, 'Houellebecq, ou l'extension d'un monde étrange', p. 88.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89 [italics in original text].

reader questions, for example, the exact circumstances of the breakdown of the narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*'s relationship with Véronique. In the same novel, the fate of the narrator's car that he strangely 'loses' in the opening pages as well as the exact events surrounding the death of Tisserand are shrouded in mystery.³⁹ The latter's status as car crash or suicide victim is never explicitly clarified and ambiguously takes place in 'beaucoup de brouillard', both a literal and metaphorical blurring of details.⁴⁰ Furthermore, in *Les Particules élémentaires*, the reasons behind Djerzinski's lengthy sabbatical and the unclear status of his suspected suicide, similarly shrouded in the mists of rural Ireland, are equally imprecise. As noted above, 'Nous pensons aujourd'hui que Michel Djerzinski est entré dans la mer', is far from a categorical description of his fate.⁴¹ Equally, in *Plateforme*, as in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, the background of and the reasons for the urban violence on the fringes of the text is never fully justified, lending the texts an atmosphere that can clearly be described in terms of Cohen's observation in the *polar* of 'la peur sentie comme atmosphère, comme une sorte de qualité répandue à la surface du monde'. Crucially, all of these questions are to remain 'unanswered', and contribute to the overall mood of mystery or poetic ambiguity of the texts.

As considered in the previous chapter, there is also an ambiguity within Houellebecq's fiction at the level of narrative voice. I demonstrated above how the extent to which the texts ultimately endorse or condemn the ideas and attitudes they present is a pressing critical challenge for Houellebecq's readers. Indeed, this has led critics of Houellebecq to describe the overall 'flou artistique' of the ideas held up for critical examination by his work and bemoan their lack of ideological clarity. It is, however, equally possible that this lack of clarity and the ideological 'obscurité' it in turn represents also contributes to some extent to the distinctive 'sentiment d'étrangeté'

³⁹ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 22-23.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁴¹ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 388.

of Houellebecq's texts. As noted in the above introduction, the editorial team of *Perpendiculaire*, the *revue* with which Houellebecq collaborated in the early 1990s, attempted to clarify the author's precise ideological standpoints following the publication of *Les Particules élémentaires*. They bemoaned the overall 'flou' within his writing and asserted that an intellectual figure should be expected to 'maîtrise sa longitude morale et la latitude esthétique [et] qu'il sache où il va, sinon où il se trouve'.⁴² The publication consequently published an interview with Houellebecq where they questioned his political opinions in order to 'informer [...] le public sur le contenu idéologique' of the novel.⁴³ The journal concluded that Houellebecq 'se considère tour à tour comme social-démocrate ou stalinien', but also stressed that he feels 'les opinions sont prédéterminées par le milieu social'. For *Perpendiculaire*, 'C'est tout aussi affligeant', and the publication excluded him from future collaborations.⁴⁴

In attempting to pin down the author's thoughts so precisely, it is possible to suggest that *Perpendiculaire* has overlooked the critical challenge of Houellebecq's writing and refocused the debate away from the text and towards the writer. Indeed, they ignore the overall effect created by the ideological 'flou' at the level of authorial voice within his writing. In the published interview, Houellebecq suggested that if he had an 'objectif essentiel' in the novel it was to 'intégrer les modes de discours', rather than provide a clear or consistent ideological position.⁴⁵ As Bordas has suggested, pinning down a distinct authorial position in Houellebecq's writing might even be an impossible undertaking: 'Parle-t-on, ou cite-t-on? Est-ce pour se moquer, pour cautionner? ou de feindre de cautionner pour mieux se moquer? L'auteur ne le sait peut-être lui-même'.⁴⁶ It is, indeed, equally possible to suggest that the overall indistinct tonality of narrative voice of much of Houellebecq's writing also contributes

⁴² Nicolas Bourriaud et al., 'Houellebecq et l'ère du flou', p. 16.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Houellebecq, 'Je crois peu en la liberté', *Revue Perpendiculaire*, p. 22.

⁴⁶ Éric Bordas, 'Ironie de l'ironie', p. 355.

significantly to the ‘sentiment d’étrangeté’ of his work. Given Cohen’s insistence on the ‘flou’ and indistinct perception as a poetic quality, there is perhaps a poetic reading that could be made of the ambiguous status of the eugenics, misogyny and racism within *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île*, or prostitution of *Plateforme*, that should be understood, to some extent at least, in terms of how they contribute to the imprecise overall emotional atmosphere of the novels in addition to their provocations.

3a. ‘Un monde total fermé sur lui-même’

As noted above, the imprecise poetic atmosphere, of the *polar* in Cohen’s analysis is also a product of how the text creates a specific space or a literary ‘monde total fermé sur lui-même’. The same process can be observed within Houellebecq’s novels, where the narratives present a succession of such closed spaces that intensify the ‘sentiment d’étrangeté’. These ‘mondes’ can be the characters themselves as well as physical spaces. The metaphor of the title of *Les Particules élémentaires*, for example, suggests how its protagonists are separate, enclosed, uncommunicative, or ‘atomised’ beings. Additionally, as noted above, the depressive Daniell of *La Possibilité d’une île* bemoans the departure of ‘les derniers vacanciers’ from his beachfront retreat and ‘avec eux [...] les derniers micro-mondes accessibles’ or other people he will never have meaningful relationships with.⁴⁷ Notably, Tisserand of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* asserts: ‘J’ai l’impression d’être une cuisse de poulet sous cellophane dans un rayon de supermarché’ to which the narrator adds: ‘Comme si vous étiez protégé du monde par une pellicule transparente, inviolable, parfaite’, stressing both protagonists’ sense of isolation from society.⁴⁸

From a spatial perspective, insular or isolated worlds appear consistently throughout Houellebecq’s fiction and reinforce the unsettling atmosphere of his texts. This is a consistent technique throughout his work and can initially be located in

⁴⁷ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d’une île*, p. 427.

⁴⁸ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 99.

Houellebecq's poetry which frequently describes a solitary poet separated from society in his apartment.⁴⁹ Sweeney notes that 'Urban spaces [...] in all of Houellebecq's novels [...] are hostile, blasted geo-psychic landscapes of social and spatial desolation that emphasize the mounting, and in some cases violent, separation between the winners and losers under neoliberal capitalism'.⁵⁰ Within *Les Particules élémentaires*, the protagonists' isolation is frequently enhanced by their living spaces. Notably, Djerzinski's apartment on rue Frémicourt, Paris, heightens his social alienation. Despite having lived there for ten years, he has no relationship with his neighbours. Looking out the window, his observation implies that his neighbours equally themselves live as 'particules élémentaires' in similar isolation: 'Par ses fenêtres on pouvait distinguer une dizaine d'immeubles, soit environ trois cents appartements', but they have no meaningful contact with each other.⁵¹ In *La Carte et le territoire*, Jed Martin's isolation is stressed by his uncomfortable and dirty studio.⁵² Martin's father is isolated in a hyper-secure 'maison bourgeoise' in Raincy,⁵³ while the fictional Michel Houellebecq has shut himself away alone in an empty and overgrown bungalow in Ireland.⁵⁴

In a similar way, Houellebecq's characters are frequently grouped together in isolated social spaces that paradoxically highlight the social alienation of the individuals. The nightclub where the narrator takes Tisserand of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, for example, sees him excluded from the rituals of dancefloor seduction, foregrounding his isolation. Equally, the New Age campsite of *Les Particules élémentaires* has a similar alienating result: 'Lieu privilégié de liberté sexuelle et d'expression du désir, le Lieu du Changement devait naturellement, plus que tout autre,

⁴⁹ As in 'La Fêlure', considered above, where 'Il y a des gens autour', but the poet is 'seul'. Houellebecq, *Poésies*, p. 150.

⁵⁰ Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair*, p. 81.

⁵¹ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 20.

⁵² 'Et non seulement l'appartement était en désordre mais il était sale, les draps étaient presque bruns, et maculés de taches organiques'. Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 70.

⁵³ 'son père [...] refusait obstinément de quitter cette maison bourgeoise, entourée d'un vaste parc, que les mouvements de population avaient progressivement reléguée au cœur d'une zone de plus en plus dangereuse, depuis peu à vrai dire entièrement contrôlée par les gangs'. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 137-138.

devenir un lieu de dépression et d'amertume'. Similarly, the solidarity of the package tourists of *Plateforme*, grouped together for the duration of their Thailand holiday dissolves into angry disputes.⁵⁵

The beach is also an important site within Houellebecq's novels since it is a place of physical liminality and contributes to the poetic mood of his texts. It has the potential to be a space for hedonistic pleasure, as in the orgies at the Cap d'Agde detailed in *Les Particules élémentaires* and the 'Miss Bikini contest' of *La Possibilité d'une île*, considered above. It is also frequently a more ambiguously suggestive space that accentuates the characters' own liminal statuses. In *Extension du domaine de la lutte* this is highlighted by the narrator's attempt to incite Tisserand to commit murder which takes place in a beachfront setting: 'La mer s'étendait à nos pieds, presque étale, formant une courbe immense; la lumière de la lune à son plein jouait doucement à sa surface'.⁵⁶ Notably Cohen's consideration of detective fiction highlights the poetic qualities of both sea and moonlight which here combine to reinforce the atmosphere of suspense as well as highlighting the narrator and Tisserand's positions as social outsiders. In *La Possibilité d'une île*, the beach also plays an equally suggestive role. Daniell initially retreats to his beachfront property for rest and recuperation. He acknowledges its poetic, even again Lovecraftian, atmosphere, it has 'une platitude géométrique, au sable immaculé, environnée de falaises aux parois verticales d'un noir éclatant'.⁵⁷ Most strikingly, the beach here heightens his feelings of alienation and it is a place that reinforces what he experiences as his social marginisation because of his age. He is reduced to masturbating 'un petit peu sur la terrasse en matant les adolescentes à poil'.⁵⁸

In a similar way to space, such an obscure and unsettling 'sentiment d'étrangeté'

⁵⁵ Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, p. 78.

⁵⁶ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 119.

⁵⁷ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 109.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

is equally enhanced by temporal liminality. This is again evident in Houellebecq's poems which are often set in the indistinct, crepuscular time of day, a time also beloved of Baudelaire, between time, neither day nor night.⁵⁹ This is equally characteristic of the novels which have similarly marginal dates for backdrops such as Sundays or holiday periods when the schedule of the Western working week is suspended, notable of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* where much of the plot takes place around the Christmas period, a period also evoked in *La Carte et le territoire*. The narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, remarks of Sunday that 'La journée était douce, mais un peu triste, comme souvent à Paris quand on ne croit pas en Dieu'.⁶⁰ There is a poetic quality to these moments in time since they have an indistinct quality and are on the fringes of quotidian existence. Indeed, their very liminality also presents Houellebecq's narrators with the opportunity to ponder their alienation.

4. Pastiche of the *roman policier*?

As well as the general mood of Houellebecq's writing, as considered in the previous section, more specific resonances with the *roman policier* can be observed throughout his novels. Houellebecq's work consistently makes use of some of the key tropes of detective fiction as well as making more implicit references to the genre. Houellebecq's narratives, for example, make frequent use of the hallmarks of detective fiction, what Narcejac and Boileau have described as the 'pieces maitresses' on 'l'échiquier' of the genre: a mysterious crime, a police detective and his systematic procedural investigation into that crime.⁶¹ Houellebecq's writing, however, never completely complies with the conventions of the genre, the overall attitude it displays towards the *roman policier*

⁵⁹ Baudelaire's appreciation of this ambiguous time is exemplified by the poems 'Le crépuscule du soir' and 'Le crépuscule du matin' from *Les Fleurs du mal*. Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, pp. 102 & 106.

⁶⁰ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 126.

⁶¹ Boileau and Narcejac, *Le Roman policier*, p. 22.

sitting at a median point between *homage* and *détournement* that I will describe as ‘pastiche’.⁶²

This can be observed, for example, in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* where the narrative presents the prospective criminal’s viewpoint of an attempted murder as the narrator provides Tisserand with a knife and attempts to entice him to attack a courting couple. In a *dossier* devoted to the *polar* in *Le Magazine Littéraire*, Alexis Brocas suggests how the novel can be read as a *roman policier*. In a brief parody of the novel’s marketing blurb he asserts: ‘Houellebecq révèle les mille violences et affronts impunis que subit tout informaticien affublé d’une tête de crapaud lorsque sa quête désespérée d’amour le pousse à franchir le seuil d’une boîte de nuit. De quoi pousser n’importe qui au meurtre...’.⁶³ Although the hoped-for slaying itself never takes place, Tisserand’s feelings of emotional and sexual alienation as established throughout the text together with the narrator’s encouragement arguably provide the character with a textually legitimate motive for murder.⁶⁴ The narrator’s efforts also present the text with a corpse – the emblematic figure of the *roman policier* – since Tisserand is subsequently found dead in the mysterious car crash, as noted above.

Houellebecq’s novella, *Lanzarote*, is equally notable for how it invokes the *polar*. The text focuses on the disaffected narrator’s holiday on the Spanish island, but also describes his growing friendship with Rudi, an inspector in the Belgian police. The final chapter also presents a textual revelation to the reader of the similar order to that of the successful *dénouement* of a *roman policier*. It reveals, through the mediation of

⁶² The precedent for my use of the term has been set by Simon Kemp who has explored how Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, Georges Perec and Jean Echenoz have used the tropes of detective fiction in their work. To define his use of the term ‘pastiche’, Kemp specifies that the texts he considers ‘are all hypertexts taking crime fiction as their hypotext’ and relate to this hypotext ‘with a certain degree of irony’. Kemp also notes that the hypertexts ‘raise questions of metafiction, implicitly or explicitly exploring the hypotext from a philosophical or narratological viewpoint’. I suggest that Houellebecq’s deployment of the tropes of crime fiction can be read along similar lines, although the degree of irony he deploys is frequently difficult to ascertain. Simon Kemp, *Crime Fiction Pastiche in Late-Twentieth-Century French Literature* (Oxford: Legenda, 2006), p. 22.

⁶³ Alexis Brocas, *Le Magazine littéraire*, 519, May 2012, p. 58.

⁶⁴ The narrator’s troubled relationship with his estranged partner also has a history that includes ambiguous police involvement.

newspaper reports read by the narrator, that Rudi, who abandoned his holiday on the island and joined the Raelian religious sect, has been arrested in a child abuse scandal affecting the group and accused of molesting a young girl.

Rudi is a policeman, but the narrator's attitude towards him is reminiscent of the crucial investigative trope of the *roman policier*. In particular, the narrator's status as detective is reinforced by his pseudo-investigation of Rudi, he repeatedly questions him throughout the text about his holiday in a manner that recalls a police interrogation,⁶⁵ and is equally consistently preoccupied about his whereabouts.⁶⁶ This lends a lightly ironic edge to their relationship since Rudi as policeman is supposed to be himself concerned with investigation, but is in turn investigated by the narrator and himself by the police investigating his crime.

The text also contains a number of 'clues' to Rudi's personality that seem to prefigure the climatic revelation of his arrest for paedophilia. These can be observed throughout the narrative and their significance becomes clear in the final chapter through the revelation noted above. He is presented on the fringes, his behaviour is somewhat strange in comparison to the other members of the group within their organised excursions and suggests his deviant sexuality. He delays the group's departure from a cactus park, for example, as he lingers to stare at one particularly phallic specimen and prefers not join in with the threesome that the narrator enjoys with the German lesbian couple Pam and Barbara.⁶⁷ As John McCann notes, an incident where Rudi stares at a camel, and is described as 'un enfant curieux', is a sinister foreshadowing of how he will later exploit such innocence for his own sexual

⁶⁵ Such as: "'Vous avez passé une bonne journée?' attaquaï-je avec décontraction'. Houellebecq, *Lanzarote et autres textes* (Paris: Libro, 2002), p. 29.

⁶⁶ 'Je me suis demandé où pouvait bien être Rudi', Houellebecq, *Lanzarote*, p. 25. In addition, 'vers onze heures [...] je commençai à m'inquiéter de l'absence de Rudi', *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

satisfaction.⁶⁸ He suggests: ‘The danger that is staring back at Rudi is not just the danger to him [from the camel, but] also the danger he represents to others’.⁶⁹

Police investigations are also of crucial narrative importance within *Plateforme*. Here the text opens in the aftermath of the murder of the narrator’s father and the subsequent procedural investigation of the case by police captain Chaumont, whom the narrator appears to hold in high esteem.⁷⁰ This admiration comes despite the officer’s cynicism, another characteristic of the hard-boiled *polar*.⁷¹ Indeed, the narrator’s understanding of, and appreciation for, police procedure has been informed by his understanding of the conventions of the *polar* in its made-for-TV form: ‘Le reste de l’entretien se déroula à peu près normalement; j’avais déjà assisté à des téléfilms de société, j’étais préparé à ce type de dialogue’.⁷² The closing pages of *Plateforme* also present a police investigation: here following the terrorist attack on the Thai resort. These investigations are carried out both by the Thai police, and the American CIA, the latter of whom lack the efficiency, or the courtesy, of their Thai counterparts or Chaumont: ‘Ils s’exprimaient brutalement, sur un ton désagréable, j’avais l’impression d’être moi-même un suspect’.⁷³ Chaumont’s polite, methodological approach will solve the crime, whereas the CIA’s brusqueness and teamwork does not lead them to any firm conclusions before the close of the novel.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ McCann, *Michel Houellebecq: Author of Our Times*, p. 109.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ ‘[Chaumont] devait être amené à rencontrer toutes sortes de gens, dans sa profession; aucun milieu social ne pouvait lui demeurer complètement étranger. La gendarmerie est un humanisme’. Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, p. 20. Later, he describes the captain’s behaviour at an identity parade, he was assertive and ‘le véritable maître des cérémonies’. Ibid., p. 27.

⁷¹ ‘Après avoir signé ma déposition, je reconduisis le capitaine Chaumont à la porte. J’avais conscience d’être un témoin décevant, lui dis-je. “Tous les témoins sont décevants...” répondit-il’. Ibid., p. 21.

⁷² Ibid., p. 21.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 327.

⁷⁴ Chaumont’s solo success and the CIA’s collective failure also adheres to another constraint of the genre: ‘Il ne doit y avoir, dans un roman policier digne de ce nom, qu’un seul véritable détective. Réunir les talents de trois ou quatre policiers pour la chasse au bandit serait non seulement disperser l’intérêt et troubler la clarté du raisonnement, mais encore prendre un avantage déloyal sur le lecteur’, in Boileau and Narcejac, *Le Roman policier*, p. 51. This failure can also be read as an example of the latent anti-Americanism that can be observed throughout Houellebecq’s work. This will not be considered in any detail in the present work. For a consideration of this implicit theme in *Les Particules élémentaires* see

Detective fiction is also referenced in *Les Particules élémentaires*. Bruno's behaviour is described twice within the text as resembling that of a detective from a television police series. In describing his 'crise de la quarantaine', the narrator notes that 'il s'exprimait comme un personnage de série policière de seconde zone'.⁷⁵ His retreat following an unsuccessful seduction attempt is later described in the following terms: 'il rebroussa chemin en agitant le bras sur le côté, tel Peter Falk dans *Columbo*'.⁷⁶ Equally, the text recounts the case, and capture of serial killer David di Meola, as noted above.

A murder, and its subsequent cover-up is also at the centre of *La Possibilité d'une île*, a text that even includes a character called 'Flic', where a crime is portrayed from the perspective of its perpetrators who are never brought to justice. Initially, the Prophet is murdered by a member of his cult jealous at the former's sexual relationship with his girlfriend whilst he, after fleeing, dies attempting to scale the cult compound's electric fence, and the girlfriend is herself murdered by the remaining adepts in an attempt to cover up the events. Indeed, the future growth of the Elhomite religion throughout the novel can be traced back to this foundational cover-up: it is the very absence of a police investigation that allows the religion to flourish.⁷⁷

4a. 'L'assassin, c'est le système'

As well as these broad narrative resonances between Houellebecq's fiction and the tropes of the *roman policier*, we can also suggest that the genre's spirit of reasoned investigation is equally characteristic of Houellebecq's writing. This is also reflected stylistically, as noted above, Noguez has described Houellebecq's use of language as suggesting a consistent movement towards objective truth. Such investigation recalls a form of understanding, based on the interpretation of 'clues' or trivial data which

Seth Armus, 'The American Menace in the Houellebecq *Affaire*', *French Politics and Society*, 17:2 (1999), 34-42.

⁷⁵ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 30.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 164.

⁷⁷ Savant asserts: 'Si on prévient la police, c'est la fin de l'organisation. On ne pourra pas survivre au scandale, et tu le sais'. Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 282.

‘permit the comprehension of a deeper, otherwise unattainable reality’ as described by Carlo Ginzburg in his consideration of what is described as a ‘cynegetic’ or ‘conjectural’ paradigm which has marked human experience, particularly throughout the historical period which has accompanied the development of the detective fiction genre, from the nineteenth century to the present day.⁷⁸ A similar movement can be observed on a broader scale within his narratives. Régis Messac has described the detective novel as ‘un récit consacré avant tout à la découverte méthodique et graduelle, par des moyens rationnels, des circonstances exactes d’un événement mystérieux’.⁷⁹ Boileau and Narcejac have also highlighted how the contemporary *roman policier* is a product of the rationalist scientific spirit of the nineteenth century: ‘si l’homme est objet de science au même titre que l’électricité, il est évident qu’une affaire criminelle pourra être étudié pas les mêmes procédés que ceux du laboratoire’.⁸⁰ In particular, they have argued how the social investigative spirit of the genre was influenced by the ‘foi déterministe [qui] caractérise profondément l’époque’ and, in particular, ‘la science positive’.⁸¹

Reasoned methodological investigation is frequently a characteristic of Houellebecq’s writing and, as Eric Sartori has argued, Houellebecq’s work has been influenced by nineteenth century rationalism, particularly the work of positivist August Comte.⁸² As considered in the previous chapter, Houellebecq’s narratives frequently refocalize away from an individual protagonist’s experience of plot events to explain or justify them deterministically in terms of their sociological or historical context.⁸³ In addition, his protagonists take a logical, reasoned approach to both describing and offering solutions to the ‘mysteries’ of life in contemporary society, particularly the

⁷⁸ Carlo Ginzburg, ‘Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm’ in Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 96-125 (101).

⁷⁹ Régis Messac, *Le Detective-novel et l’influence de la pensée scientifique*, cited in Platten, *The Pleasures of Crime*, p. 12.

⁸⁰ Boileau and Narcejac, *Le Roman policier*, p. 21.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

⁸² Eric Sartori, ‘Michel Houellebecq, romancier positiviste’, pp. 143-151.

⁸³ See pp. 160-163 above.

functioning of human sexual desire. Notably, Cohen has described the detective of the *roman policier* as an ‘intellectual héros’, a description that could equally be applied to Houellebecq’s resoundingly cerebral protagonists.⁸⁴ The narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, for example, borrows the language and logic of financial economics to explain how desire functions within society, the repetition reinforcing the structural similarity between the two processes: ‘En système économique parfaitement libéral, certains accumulent des fortunes considérables; d’autres croupissent dans le chômage et la misère. En système sexuel parfaitement libéral, certains ont une vie érotique variée et excitante; d’autres sont réduits à la masturbation et la solitude’.⁸⁵ The ultra-rational Michel Djerzinski, for example, develops a eugenic solution to the elusive problem of suffering attributed to sexual desire within *Les Particules élémentaires*.⁸⁶ In addition, the posthuman narrator of the same text also presents a reasoned objective justification for the extinction of humanity throughout the text. Equally, Michel, Valérie and Jean-Yves of *Plateforme* themselves produce a rational solution to the inequalities of the sexual economy through their global network of legalised brothels.

There is, of course, an important difference between Houellebecq’s novels and the traditional *roman policier* in that the latter genre sees a guilty individual brought to account for their crimes. There can be no precise individuals held to account for the ‘crimes’ of social and sexual alienation as inflicted upon the protagonists of Houellebecq’s fiction. Individual suffering is unavoidable within Houellebecq’s work since it is a deterministic production of a history and a society ruled by economic and libidinal economies. The victims, for example, include Daniell in *La Possibilité d’une île* who, after the departure of Esther is a lonely, ageing singleton, wallowing in a

⁸⁴ Cohen, *Le Haut langage*, p. 247.

⁸⁵ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 100.

⁸⁶ Boileau and Narcejac also described the characteristic detective as ‘Cérébraux à l’extrême, ils paraissent incapables d’aimer’. Boileau and Narcejac, *Le Roman policier*, p. 30. This also clearly resonates with Djerzinski who: ‘menait une existence purement intellectuelle. Les sentiments qui constituent la vie des hommes n’étaient pas son sujet d’observation; il les connaissait mal’. Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 148.

society that values youth above all. It equally affects the victims of David di Meola in *Les Particules élémentaires* who is presented as the inevitable by-product of liberal social values. The casting of society itself as the ‘criminal’ also directly reflects the spirit of radical politics that preoccupies the novels associated with the *néo-polar* as I shall suggest presently. As Houellebecq has stressed in interview: ‘Il faut designer les coupables [...] j’injurie abondamment la génération soixante-huitarde et plus généralement le XXe siècle [...]. C’est de leur faute’.⁸⁷

This social dimension of Houellebecq’s writing in particular recalls that of the writers associated with the *néo-polar*, a form of the French *roman policier* which reinvigorated the genre in the 1970s and 1980s.⁸⁸ In addition to Thierry Jonquet, who will be considered in the following section, the epithet has been applied to the work of writers such as Jean-Patrick Manchette and Jean-François Vilar whose novels are frequently striking for their acute political and social sensitivity. These writers articulate a distinctly contemporary French experience within the framework of the *roman policier* genre and their work frequently portrays, as Claire Gorrara has argued, socially alienated character types at a far remove from the ‘private eye’ of their American counterpart, all of which have a presence in Houellebecq’s novels: ‘terrorists, former left-wing militants, the unemployed, disaffected youth [and] the mentally disturbed’.⁸⁹ Gorrara has also noted how the *néo-polar* is marked in particular by an overall sense of disillusionment following the political upheavals of late 1960s French politics and radical dissatisfaction with the realities of social life, which also clearly resonates with Houellebecq’s work.⁹⁰ Indeed, Jonquet, Manchette and Vilar were all politically active within the French left wing and a radical anti-capitalist strands are observable in their

⁸⁷ Houellebecq, ‘Je crois peu en la liberté’, p. 12.

⁸⁸ See Claire Gorrara in *The Roman Noir in Post-War French Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) and Platten, *The Pleasures of Crime*. Both writers have questioned the stability of the term *néo-polar*, but I use it to suggest a degree of political and social awareness in the genre that resonates with Houellebecq’s work.

⁸⁹ Gorrara, *The Roman Noir in Post-War French Culture*, p. 59.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

work. In the *néo-polar*, the guilty party is frequently to be found within administration or the state itself, rather than amongst the citizens. Frequently, the finger of guilt is pointed at societal structures, as Ernest Mandel has noted in a formulation that equally applies to Houellebecq's work: 'l'assassin, c'est le système'.⁹¹

5. *La Carte et le territoire* or 'Who killed Michel Houellebecq?'

The most explicit and sustained references to the *roman policier*, and in particular the *néo-polar*, within Houellebecq's fiction occur in *La Carte et le territoire* where the police investigation into the murder of Michel Houellebecq is led by inspector Jasselin. The investigation forms the bulk of the final third of the novel which can be read in terms of its explicit homage to, or pastiche of, the genre. The text, however, always avoids becoming a fully-fledged piece of detective fiction: although Houellebecq makes use of some of the characteristics of the *roman policier* within *La Carte et le territoire*, it is consistently subverted with the result that the genre is never completely adopted within his writing. This section will consider the limits of final third of the novel's relationship with detective fiction before highlighting the text's explicit and implicit intertextual relationship with the work of writer Thierry Jonquet.

This section of the novel exploits the characteristic hallmarks of the genre: it has a corpse, a police investigation and a weather-beaten detective leading the case. It also resonates particularly with what Tzvetan Todorov has referred to as the 'roman à énigme',⁹² a form of detective fiction where the narrative presents the procedural resolution of a crime that has taken place before the beginning of the narrative where the detective's role is to piece together the motive and deduce the perpetrator through

⁹¹ Ernest Mandel, *Meutres exquis* (Montreuil: PEC La Brèche, 1986), cited in Gorrara, *The Roman Noir in Post-War French Culture*, p. 58.

⁹² The use of the term 'roman' to describe this section of the text is, of course, problematic since the movement towards the *roman policier* genre only takes place at the start of the third section of *La Carte et le territoire*. It is most appropriate to suggest that this section of the novel resembles, rather than completely becomes, a 'roman à énigme'.

his investigation.⁹³ Indeed, the name of the culprit and circumstances of Houellebecq's murder are withheld from the reader until the text's epilogue, creating a form of narrative suspense that is generally uncharacteristic of Houellebecq's texts. This creates a structural opposition between reader and narrative that, as Todorov has noted, is typical of the genre and on the whole atypical of Houellebecq's work.⁹⁴

Despite *La Carte et le territoire's* similarities with some of the fundamental motifs and structure of the *roman policier*, it never entirely becomes a *polar*.⁹⁵ This is most evident in how the text temporally continues the previous two-thirds of the novel in which the characteristic toposes of the detective novel are absent. Although the final third resonates with some of the established constraints of the genre, it cannot be fully assimilated into detective fiction. This is particularly noticeable in comparison with the conventions of the genre elucidated by novelist S.S. Van Dine. The investigation of the murder of Michel Houellebecq does clearly follow some of these guidelines, such as the insistence on a death being at the heart of the text, it clearly flaunts others. In addition to his insistence on the presence of both a body and a detective,⁹⁶ Van Dine asserts that:

Le coupable doit toujours être une personne qui ait joué un rôle plus ou moins important dans l'histoire, c'est-à-dire quelqu'un que le lecteur connaisse et qui l'intéresse. Charger du crime, au dernier chapitre, un personnage qu'il vient d'introduire [...] serait, de la part de l'auteur, avouer son incapacité de se mesurer avec le lecteur.⁹⁷

The murderer of *La Carte et le territoire* is revealed as Adolphe Petissaud, who is identified in the epilogue without having previously appeared in the narrative. This flaunts Van Dine's rules and immediately deflates the tension or suspense created

⁹³ 'Les cent cinquante pages qui séparent la découverte du crime de la révélation du coupable sont consacrées à un lent apprentissage: on examine indice après indice, piste après piste'. Tzvetan Todorov, *Poétique de la prose* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), p. 11.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁹⁵ Raphaël Sorin has described this section of *La Carte et le territoire* as 'une parodie de polar', but Houellebecq's parodic intent is far from self-evident. Julien Blanc-Gras, 'Raphaël Sorin: "Bravo Michel"', *Evene.fr*, 8 November 2010 <<http://www.evene.fr/livres/actualite/raphael-sorin-bravo-michel-2905.php>> [accessed 15 April 2013].

⁹⁶ 'Un roman policier sans cadavre, cela n'existe pas', 'Il ne doit y avoir, dans un roman policier digne de ce nom, qu'un seul véritable détective'. Boileau and Narcejac, *Le Roman Policier*, pp. 51 & 53.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 51.

through the police investigation of the case. Indeed, the only two characters to have played any significant role in the narrative and had any direct contact with the fictional Houellebecq, artist Jed Martin and novelist Frédéric Beigbeder, are, somewhat unsatisfactorily from the perspective of the *polar*, rejected as suspects early on. In addition, any dramatic tension the reader might anticipate in a *roman policier* through the climatic reveal of the guilty party is further dissipated by Jasselin's absence from the text at the moment of the 'revelation'. By the time the murderer is unveiled, Jasselin has started his retirement from the police, and the investigation is being led by Ferber, his younger colleague, who the former has asked to be kept informed about any case developments. Ferber's telephone call to Jasselin to inform him that the case has been closed, is suggested in the text but it is not reported directly in the narrative, depriving the text of a final satisfying revelation where the detective who has steered the investigation since its launch presents the results of his police work, a characteristic flourish of crime fiction, to be found notably within Agatha Christie's Poirot novels.⁹⁸

5a. Houellebecq and Thierry Jonquet: 'En France c'est le meilleur, à mon avis'

Rather than only reading this section of *La Carte et le territoire* as a broad pastiche of the genre, it resonates specifically with the work of *néo-polar* writer Thierry Jonquet. Jonquet is explicitly evoked in a discussion between Jasselin and his colleague Ferber concerning how the former is going to occupy himself in his impending retirement. Jasselin reveals he is going to read French detective fiction and asks the literate Ferber for a recommendation. Ferber responds 'sans hésiter': 'Thierry Jonquet. En France c'est le meilleur, à mon avis'.⁹⁹ This explicit reference to Jonquet, who published a number of critically regarded detective novels before his death in 2009 and has been associated with the reinvigoration of the genre in France, acts as a textual clue and provides us with a way of reading the unsatisfying resolution of the murder of Michel Houellebecq

⁹⁸ A characteristic 'set piece' where the detective reveals the results of his investigations and the guilty party to suspects and the bereaved can be found, for example in Christie's *Five Little Pigs* (1942).

⁹⁹ Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 383.

within *La Carte et le territoire*.¹⁰⁰ It also suggests a sincere authorial appreciation of Jonquet's work.

The *dénouement* of the Houellebecq murder case in *La Carte et le territoire* can be read as a specific and deliberate homage to Jonquet's work.¹⁰¹ In particular it is an explicit, if slightly oblique, intertextual reference to his most well known text *Mygale*, published in 1984 and re-issued in 1995. The links between Houellebecq's text and Jonquet's are striking and the links between the two appear designed to encourage a reading of *La Carte et le territoire* with *Mygale* an explicit hypotext. These arguably deepen an informed reader's immersion, or 'enchantment', in this section of the text since a successful recognition of Jonquet's implicit presence here presents a *mise-en-abyme* of the investigation, raising the reader's status to that of a meta-detective. The culprit of Houellebecq's murders is revealed as Petissaud, a Cannes-based plastic surgeon, art collector and experimental artist working with real human body parts, supported by Patrick Le Braouzec, a career criminal who Petissaud has engaged as an insect smuggler. Most strikingly, when the police apprehend Le Brouzec, he is found to be carrying, amongst other insects, 'une mygale' concealed in the boot of his car.¹⁰² The reference is again explicitly underlined later in the text when the police discover a basement art gallery in Petissaud's home, including a bizarre insect collection where the

¹⁰⁰ There are two other explicit references to fiction in the final third of *La Carte et le territoire* that warrant further consideration than will be provided here. Firstly, Christian Ferber, Jasselin's police colleague is described as reading Gérard de Nerval's *Aurélia* (1855) on two occasions in the text, pp. 278 & 284. The explicit intertextual reference to Nerval's text primarily serves to reinforce Ferber's 'sensible' character, p. 274. Secondly, *La Carte et le territoire* also contains an oblique reference to 'un ouvrage qui à proprement parler n'était pas un roman, mais les souvenirs d'un ancien détective privé qui avait exercé à Bangkok, et qui avait choisi de retracer sa carrière sous la forme d'une trentaine de nouvelles brèves' that Jasselin has read (p. 304). The text is not explicitly named, but Jasselin's reference seems to suggest Warren Olson's *Confessions of A Bangkok Private Eye* (2006), ghost written by Stephen Leather. Jasselin notes the 'monotonie écrasante' of the text, the low quality of which serves to stress the protagonist's lack of cultural savvy, elsewhere reinforced by his ignorance about who Michel Houellebecq is, and contrast him with the awareness of Ferber. Olson's text also serves as an illustration of Jasselin's assertion that 'les crimes qui n'avaient pas pour mobile l'argent avaient pour mobile le sexe, c'était l'un ou l'autre' (Ibid.).

¹⁰¹ Arnaud Viviant has described this section of the novel as 'un hommage à Thierry Jonquet [...] et notamment à son roman "Mygale"', but has not taken his analysis further. Arnaud Viviant, *BiblioObs* <<http://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/romans/20100831.BIB5564/houellebecq-le-monde-mode-d-039-emploi.html>> [accessed 12 May, 2013].

¹⁰² Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 386.

surgeon would watch insects devoured at his command by ‘une dizane de mygales’, clearly reinforcing a direct line of influence from Jonquet’s text to Houellebecq’s.¹⁰³

The characterisation of Petissaud is also highly reminiscent of Jonquet’s *Mygale* with the latter text providing a model for Houellebecq’s protagonist. In Jonquet’s text, Richard Lafargue, also a plastic surgeon, avenges the rape of his young daughter by kidnapping one of her attackers, holding him hostage in his basement, where he drugs and gradually forces him to endure both a series of sex change operations and sadomasochistic sex acts from strangers. Lafargue himself is rich, famous, aristocratic, an aficionado of high culture: he drives a Mercedes, plays chess, appears on television programmes as an expert, engages domestic staff at his countryside home and is an aficionado of Chopin and Liszt. Petissaud in Houellebecq is similarly solitary, aristocratic and sadistic, and is described in terms of his ‘cadre de vie classique, prévisible, d’un grand bourgeois hédoniste’.¹⁰⁴ Lafargue’s grotesque experimentation takes place on his captive, which involves the removal of his genitalia. Petissaud has similarly experimented on the human body, in the name of art rather than revenge and produced ‘monstrueuses chimères humaines’, whose genitals are similarly mutated with: ‘Des sexes [...] greffés sur des torsos’.¹⁰⁵ Petissaud is thus a perverse purveyor of body art, whereas Lafargue has been described by David Le Breton as ‘l’artiste corporel

¹⁰³ Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 389. In turn, the description of Petissaud’s insect collection in *La Carte et le territoire* also has an artistic antecedent: ‘une immense table lumineuse [...] À l’intérieur, séparés par des cloisons transparentes, s’agitaient des centaines d’insectes, regroupés par espèces [...] un des policiers déclencha l’ouverture d’une cloison: une dizaine de mygales se précipitèrent, s’agitant sur leurs pattes velues, vers le compartiment voisin, entreprenant aussitôt de mettre en pièces les insectes qui l’occupaient [...]. Ainsi, voilà à quoi le docteur Petissaud occupait ses soirées [...]. Il se prenait pour Dieu, tout simplement; et il en agissait avec ses populations d’insectes comme Dieu avec les populations humaines’ evokes an artwork planned by Chinese artist Huang Yong Ping, ‘Le Théâtre du monde’, which provoked a media scandal when it was proposed for the Centre Pompidou ‘Hors limites’ exhibition in November 1994. This piece was to comprise of a ‘terrarium in which assorted insects were to be allowed to roam freely [...]’. The artist was to stage ‘encounters’ between the insects that would have included some being devoured by their natural predators. Anthony Julius, *Transgressions: The Offences of Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), p. 140.

¹⁰⁴ Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, pp. 387-388.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 388. Petissaud’s gruesome artworks are also particularly evocative of the real-world sculpture of British artists Jake and Dinos Chapman who have used similar, although artificial, techniques to create similarly macabre effects in works such as *Zygotic acceleration, biogenetic, de-sublimated libidinal model* (1995).

le plus accompli de l'œuvre de Thierry Jonquet'.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, Lafargue aims for complete domination over his captive, being responsible for his 'rebirth' as a woman, a position echoed by the following description of Petissaud in *La Carte et le territoire*: 'Il se prenait pour Dieu, tout simplement; et il en agissait avec ses populations d'insectes comme Dieu avec les populations humaines'.¹⁰⁷

Another important point of comparison between the work of Jonquet and Houellebecq is how both writers repeatedly exploit the affective potential of writing and manage horrific or gruesome images in their work to maximise its emotional impact. As noted in Chapter Two, images of worms and enucleation abound in Houellebecq's writing. The Michel Houellebecq murder scene is another notably repulsive example. Platten demonstrates how horrific images are an important part of Jonquet's novelistic technique. In his discussion of a crime scene within Jonquet's *Moloch* (1998), which includes the unpleasant discovery of the corpses of children, Platten demonstrates how the 'emotional impact of the horror' is managed with an initial description that only conveys some details before being 'transmitted in full to the reader' to greater affect later in the narrative, thus creating suspense.¹⁰⁸ A similar technique can be observed in *La Carte et le territoire* in reference to the crime scene of Houellebecq's murder. The murder scene is focalized through Jasselin, but a high degree of narrative tension is introduced to the text by the delayed description of the grim details of it. On page 273, the narrative reveals that 'Jasselin comprit qu'il allait vivre un des pires moments de sa carrière', but it is not until page 288 that the narrative reveals the grisly details of the scene. In between, tension has been increased through the description of the emotional

¹⁰⁶ David Le Breton, 'Thierry Jonquet ou le polar gnostique', *Temps Noir*, 9, pp. 57-68 (p. 64).

¹⁰⁷ Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 389. *Mygale* is also notable for its distinctive tripartite narrative structure. Equally, *La Carte et le territoire* is similarly based around three characters, but through a different narrative structure marshalled by an omniscient third-party narrator rather than the three first-person narratives of *Mygale*.

¹⁰⁸ Platten, *The Pleasures of Crime*, p. 164.

responses of Jasselin's police colleagues who have seen the corpse,¹⁰⁹ as well as the Baudelarian flies that have gathered on the corpses of Houellebecq and his dog before the full details of the scene are revealed.

The overall textual justification for the horrific images within the text also encourages close identification between the two writers. On Jonquet, Platten highlights how his 'aesthetic vision is anchored to broader ideological and historical contexts', and suggests the horrific in his work 'reflects truths about our moral and social beings that we either fail recognise or simply leave for another day'.¹¹⁰ As considered in the introduction to the present work, critics including Marc Weitzmann have considered the relation between Houellebecq's social vision and his writing. Houellebecq himself has described his writing project in a way that encourages the identification with Jonquet: following the publication of *Les Particules elementaires*, he responded to negative criticism: 'j'apporte de mauvaises nouvelles: et on pardonne rarement aux porteurs de mauvaises nouvelles'.¹¹¹

6. Houellebecq and *roman policier* style

In addition to how Houellebecq's novels suggest and interrogate many of the characteristic narrative tropes and overall mood of the *roman policier*, his texts can be read in conjunction with the genre from the perspective of their style. Indeed, the distinctively 'plat' mode of writing that critics have located within Houellebecq's work can be seen to reinforce the relationship between Houellebecq's work and the detective fiction genre, suggesting it makes an appropriate point of comparison.

Todorov notes that the language that forms the prose of detective fiction does not typically draw attention to itself in terms of its aesthetic qualities, arguing that the style of the *polar* is generally 'parfaitement transparent' and uses language that is

¹⁰⁹ 'C'était la première fois qu'il voyait un collègue dans cet état'. Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 273.

¹¹⁰ Platten, *The Pleasures of Crime*, p. 166.

¹¹¹ 'Michel Houellebecq répond à *Perpendiculaire*', *Le Monde*, 18 September, 1998.

‘simple, clair [et] direct’.¹¹² Boileau and Narcejac have similarly stressed such a rejection of the aesthetic: ‘le roman policier évacue tout romanesque [...]. Ce qu’il sait dissiper, c’est le flou poétique, la convention littéraire, les clairs-obscur du cœur’.¹¹³

These descriptions of the language typical of the *roman policier* clearly resonate with the critical descriptions of the so-called ‘plat’ style of Houellebecq’s writing considered in the first chapter of this thesis, such as Marie Redonnet’s observation of the ‘absence totale de poésie’ of Houellebecq’s prose.¹¹⁴ Whereas such comments were intended as negative judgements about Houellebecq’s writing when viewed from the perspective of the ‘literary’ novel, they can paradoxically be viewed as positive qualities within the context of the *roman policier*. Indeed, a ‘lack’ of literary style, or at least a de-emphasis, of style within writing is, according to the critics considered above, necessary for the construction of a detective fiction narrative. It is thus possible to suggest that the roots of Houellebecq’s ‘plat’ literary style, which is frequently appropriately described ‘simple, clair [et] direct’ and seems to shun the ‘romanesque’ aesthetic, can be read as further demonstration of the extent to which Houellebecq has embraced the non-literary conventions of the *roman policier*.

Alain Besançon has made an explicit comparison between the novelist’s use of language and that of the *roman policier* genre. For Besançon, Houellebecq’s writing resembles that of Georges Simenon who he casts as ‘la référence littéraire, le point de comparaison éclairant’ for his work and notes the poetic effect that can be observed in the work of both writers:

Le ressort du roman simenonien est celui-ci: une existence médiocre, répétitive, ennuyée est brusquement arrachée à l’engluement par un accident: un crime, une passion amoureuse, ou les deux. Le personnage devient pour un moment intéressant, il sort du rang. [...] Puis la réalité le rattrape [...] Ce n’est pas lui qui fait réflexion sur ce qui lui est arrivée. Il n’en est pas capable. C’est pourquoi il ne peut que décrire minutieusement ce qu’il a perçu, dans un langage pauvre et

¹¹² Todorov, *Poétique de la prose*, p. 13.

¹¹³ Boileau and Narcejac, *Le Roman policier*, p. 31.

¹¹⁴ Marie Redonnet, ‘La barbarie postmoderne’, p. 59.

neutre. Mais le lecteur [...] peut s'élever vers les hauteurs: il vient de lire une tragédie, une atroce histoire d'amour. Alors seulement la poésie apparaît.¹¹⁵

Such 'pauvre et neutre' language, reflecting the experience of a character who has lived through a traumatic experience, is particularly striking throughout *Plateforme*. The entirety of the text is narrated by a figure who has survived a devastating terrorist attack that killed his much-loved partner Valérie, as considered above with reference to post-traumatic stress disorder.¹¹⁶ The description of the incident, for example is notable for the lack of overt emotion it displays:

Au moment où je jetais, de nouveau, un regard reconnaissant à Valérie, j'entendis sur la droite une espèce de dé clic. Je perçus alors un bruit de moteur venant de la mer, aussitôt coupé. À l'avant de la terrasse, une grande femme blonde se leva en poussant un hurlement. Il y eut alors une première rafale, un crépitement bref. Elle se retourna vers nous, portant les mains à son visage: une balle avait atteint son œil, son orbite n'était plus qu'un trou sanglant; puis elle s'effondra sans un bruit.¹¹⁷

The language here reflects a degree of objective neutrality that one might anticipate is commensurate with that of a survivor of such a traumatic event. The narrator is unable to come to terms with the magnitude of the attack and thus relates the facts as he knows them in clinical, simple terms. As the narrator suggests at the start of the second sentence of the extract, he relates his perception of the events of the attack as precisely as he can. The language is journalistic, confined to the facts and restricted to short sentences offering little more than a subject, verb and object. In Cohen's terms, the description here is intensely prosaic in that it does little else than proffer fact. It concurrently, however, has the potential to create an emotional effect on the reader, precisely because of its neutrality, as discussed in more detail in the previous chapter. At this point in the narrative of *Plateforme*, for example, where the preceding passages have included more poetically expressed descriptions of Michel and Valérie's love, the

¹¹⁵ Alain Besançon, 'Houellebecq', *Commentaire*, 96, Winter 2001-2002, pp. 939-944.

¹¹⁶ Protagonists throughout Houellebecq's work could equally be described as 'post-traumatic' to at least some extent, in terms of both background and expression. Notably, Djerzinski and Bruno of *Les Particules élémentaires* were separated from their mother at an early age. Likewise, the mother of Jed Martin of *La Carte et le territoire*, killed herself during his childhood.

¹¹⁷ Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, p. 320.

incursion of such brutally-sparse description provides a sharp, even shocking contrast to the text.¹¹⁸ This interruption or juxtaposition of the prosaic into the poetic directly recalls the ‘brutality’ we attributed to Houellebecq’s poetry and prose in chapter one of the present work.

7. Dissatisfying narrative closure

This chapter has so far considered Houellebecq’s writing from the perspective of genre, most particularly how it can be read, building on Cohen’s consideration of the *roman policier*, in terms of how it creates a ‘poetic’ or emotionally immersive reading experience. It has also demonstrated that specific intertextual resonances with the genre exist which enhance such a process, most strikingly between *La Carte et le territoire* and the work of Thierry Jonquet.

Despite the strength of such resonances, Houellebecq’s work always falls short of becoming detective fiction and there is a crucial difference between Houellebecq’s narratives and those of the *roman policier*. This can be observed through a consideration of the implicit politics of the genre. As William W. Stowe has noted, detective fiction is marked by its conservatism:

Politically, morally, and epistemologically, detective fiction tends to affirm rather than to question, to take social structures, moral codes, and ways of knowing as givens, rather than subjecting them to thorough, principled criticism.¹¹⁹

In such a way, detective narratives are concerned with resolution and with ‘righting’ perceived ‘wrongs’. Agatha Christie, for example, has been described as ‘radical conservative thinker’ by Johann Hari and her work promotes a ‘clear natural order [which] is only disrupted by greed, wickedness or misguided political ambition’.¹²⁰ The

¹¹⁸ The previous chapter of *Plateforme*, for example, includes the description of an idyllic boat trip to a remote Thai island where the pair are free to express their love: ‘Le pilote coupait le moteur. Valérie me regardait, nous restions sans parler ni faire un geste: les instants s’écoulaient dans un silence absolu’, p. 327.

¹¹⁹ William W. Stowe, ‘Critical Investigations: Convention and Ideology in Detective Fiction’, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 31:4 (1989), 570-591 (p. 570).

¹²⁰ Johan Hari, ‘Agatha Christie – radical conservative thinker’

criminal protagonist who seeks such disruption will inevitably be caught and punished. For Hari, Christie's world suggests 'a natural order that will always act spontaneously against evil to restore its own rural sense of calm'.¹²¹ Thierry Jonquet, writing from a completely different political viewpoint as a former left-wing activist, is similarly concerned with correcting moral transgressions and presents a similarly conservative perspective. *Mygale*, for example, can be read as the lengthy torture and punishment of the rapists of Lafargue's daughter.¹²²

In her consideration of popular fiction, Diana Holmes has explored the relationship between text and reader and suggested how bestselling novels can frequently be read in terms of how they promote a feeling of 'reconciliation with the world'.¹²³ Holmes notes that 'these novels produce pleasure from the representation of a contemporary world in itself experienced as hostile or incomprehensible' which is resolved or overcome in the texts she considers, a conclusion that can also be seen to apply to much detective fiction.¹²⁴ For Holmes, this is brought about through the creation of a reading experience which ensures the emotional engagement of the reader by the 'conventions of mimetic realism', including 'the teleology of plot that draws all fictional events into a purposeful pattern', 'coherent characterisation' and a shared frame of reference with the reader.¹²⁵ Similar conclusions could clearly be drawn about the detective novel, particularly in terms of how they frequently present a similarly teleological or reconciliatory narrative. Crime writer P.D. James, for example, has noted that the genre 'confirms our hope that, despite some evidence to the contrary, we live in a beneficent and moral universe in which problems can be solved by rational means and

<<http://johannhari.com/2003/10/04/agatha-christie-radical-conservative-thinker>>, [accessed August 27, 2013] (para. 11 of 27).

¹²¹ Hari, 'Agatha Christie – radical conservative thinker' (para. 11 of 27).

¹²² Among other Jonquet's other texts, *Les Orpailleurs* (1993) can be read as a contemporary score-settling of crimes committed during World War Two.

¹²³ Diana Holmes, 'The Comfortable Reader: Romantic Bestsellers and Critical Disdain', p. 288.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 289. Viard, for example, has argued how Houellebecq can be read from the perspective of Balzacian mimetic realism. Bruno Viard, 'Faut il en rire ou en pleurer? Michel Houellebecq du côté de Marcel Mauss et du côté de Balzac', *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, pp. 31-42.

peace and order restored from communal or personal disruption and chaos'.¹²⁶

While Houellebecq's writing frequently uses the techniques highlighted by Holmes and engages many of the tropes of detective fiction, when read from the perspective of genre they clearly do not present the same optimistic sense of reconciliation to that Holmes locates in popular fiction. Houellebecq's work has been described as politically conservative or even reactionary.¹²⁷ While this may, or may not, be borne out through his overall social vision, this does not appear to be supported by the way narrative closure operates within his fiction since his novels do not always present the reader with a satisfying conclusion: the closing passages of Houellebecq's novels rather situate his overall vision most accurately between conservatism, or optimistic reconciliation, and a more pessimistic fracture. This is perhaps best illustrated by the ambiguous fates of his protagonists in the closing pages of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d'une île* as considered above where their reconciliations with the world are largely questionable or inconclusive. The final lines of *La Carte et le territoire* are perhaps the most definitively pessimistic within Houellebecq's fiction. Jed Martin's final artwork is described: plastic human figurines decomposing amongst ever-growing vegetation which acts as 'le symbole de l'anéantissement généralisé de l'espèce humaine' since 'Le triomphe de la végétation est total'.¹²⁸ Despite the arguable presence of what appears to be another characteristic harmonious dodecasyllabic alexandrine in the final line, the overall suggestion here is that human life is doomed: fracture and futility rather than Holmes' reconciliation.

Indistinct closure such as this is accentuated through the experience of the reader, particularly when considered in terms of how Houellebecq treats the tropes of the *roman policier* at the end of *La Carte et le territoire*. The pessimism is reflected by

¹²⁶ P.D. James, *Talking About Detective Fiction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), p. 174.

¹²⁷ Houellebecq has been described as a 'nouveau réactionnaire' in an extended essay by Daniel Lindenberg. Daniel Lindenberg, *Le Rappel à l'ordre: Enquête sur les nouveaux réactionnaires* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

¹²⁸ Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, p. 428.

what amounts to the deflation of the text or the reader's disappointment. As noted above, a reader's expectation for a satisfying or rewarding narrative closure has been created through the explicit and largely faithful use of the tropes of the genre in the final third of the text. A key facet of Kemp's consideration of the pastiche of crime fiction in contemporary French novels is the ironic relationship the authors he has considered have to the genre. If we are to conclude that Houellebecq's relationship to the *polar* is ironic, it is perhaps to be observed in how the text fails to bring Jasselin's investigation to a convincing or entirely satisfying *dénouement*, instead leaving room for doubt and the case slightly open.¹²⁹ In some ways, the less than satisfying or inconclusive reading experience thus reflects the pessimism of the text's final line: there can be no satisfying conclusions and existence is doomed to be forever unresolved. In other ways, such partial narrative closure further immerses the reader in the text. In Cohen's terms, for example, if the case is not completely solved, the text retains a degree of 'poéticité'. In a similar way, it can be read as an implicit metaphysical or philosophical question that the reader is invited to contemplate. In his consideration of 'open' cases at the end of novels that mobilise the tropes of detective fiction, Kemp notes: 'a denouement which acknowledges that human affairs are never settled and the questions of the human condition with which literature deals always remain open, extends an invitation to the reader to explore these areas further in their own mind (or their own creativity)'.¹³⁰ Building on Kemp's observation, it is also possible to suggest that Houellebecq here makes an implicit critical comment about the agency of literature to consider such questions. Any dramatic reconciliation in fiction can only ever be artificial. While literature appears to offer poetic 'enchantment' or immersion, this is can only ever be

¹²⁹ It can be regarded as ambiguous, as proven by Viard's own attempt to solve the case (and casting artist Damien Hirst as murderer) as noted above.

¹³⁰ Kemp, *Crime Fiction Pastiche in Late-Twentieth-Century French Literature*, p. 74.

fleeting or insufficient.¹³¹

8. Conclusion

This chapter has proposed a reading of Houellebecq's fiction that takes the author's apparent appreciation of the *roman policier* genre into consideration. In addition to highlighting a number of striking intertextual links between his novels and the tropes of the genre particularly, although not exclusively, in *La Carte et le territoire*, it has also considered how Houellebecq has mobilised what Cohen has noted as the poetic or emotional effect of the genre in his own work. Mirroring my conclusions in the previous chapter, however, a reader's emotional engagement with Houellebecq's work is not without its challenges. Here, Houellebecq's use of the tropes of detective fiction are ultimately undermined resulting in what can be received as a frustrating or disappointing reading experience, one that directly reflects the overall pessimism of Houellebecq's *oeuvre*.

¹³¹ This overall 'insufficiency' of literature is another recurrent strand of Houellebecq's work, but will not be considered here in detail since the relationship to genre is the focus of this chapter. In *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, and as noted above, the narrator questions the extent to which writing can provide a relief to the author's suffering and concludes, 'L'écriture ne soulage guère [...]. Faible succès, en vérité', p. 14. In an early poem, the poet asserts, 'A quoi bon égrener de nouvelles anecdotes? Caractère inutile du roman'. Houellebecq, *Poésies*, p. 28.

Conclusion

This thesis has provided a detailed overview of style in Houellebecq's novels, and has considered how the emotional engagement of the reader is a consistent preoccupation of his fiction. It has demonstrated, in particular, how an array of literary techniques generate such engagement by means of brutal shock, intense pathos and creating suspense or 'enchantment' throughout his writing. In the course of the above analysis I have argued that this is an important characteristic of Houellebecq's work which can be mapped from his early poetry to his subsequent prose.

In the first chapter, I have suggested that this element of style frequently takes the form of a 'méthode d'attaque brutale' or the affrontment of his reader through visceral or unsettling description in an approach that appears designed to share the writer's self disgust in a way that produces an affective response. As noted above, this capacity of Houellebecq's literary style resonates closely with the work of Charles Baudelaire and H.P. Lovecraft. In the second chapter I have argued that these techniques, which have their stylistic precedents his early poetry, can be observed to a considerable extent in Houellebecq's later novels. As I have demonstrated, this amounts to the persistent deployment of the strikingly visceral images of his poetry as well as the use of what I have described above as 'poetic prose' within passages of his fiction, which too draws on his poetic technique. As this chapter suggests, the impact of pathos is an important concern for Houellebecq's writing, but its evocation is frequently complicated by a paradoxical process of restriction which both undermines and accentuates the emotional effect it creates. Ambiguity of this nature is another distinctive feature of Houellebecq's literary technique and has been closely considered in Chapter Three with particular attention to narrative perspective. Here, I have demonstrated how traces of authorial presence in Houellebecq's fiction appear to encourage the reader's identification with the living author but also concurrently

complicate the extent to which he or she can engage emotionally with his writing, resulting in the unsettling and ambiguous tone of much of Houellebecq's work. Chapter Four has focused on genre in Houellebecq's writing and suggested how his work can be read in the context of the conventions of detective fiction, a genre where the reader's emotional engagement is critical for its success, but which is here again repeatedly and ambivalently subverted.

Whereas this thesis is primarily concerned with the author's individual literary style, Houellebecq's work can also be read in terms of what a close critical consideration of this aspect of his writing suggests about the role of literature in contemporary culture. As I note in the introduction, Houellebecq's critics have examined the sociological diagnoses that his work makes in relation to contemporary society throughout. In this thesis, I have argued that it is also possible to suggest that Houellebecq concurrently articulates an acutely personal depressive experience, as exemplified by the visceral images his texts consistently evoke. It is, however, equally possible to assert that both of these qualities in Houellebecq's writing are not in fact mutually exclusive and operate in combination. Rather than merely the product of solipsistic or private wallowing in poetic despair, his creative work can be read as an attempt to communicate a personal or what might appear to be an authentic authorial experience with his readers within the context of a contemporary society or dominant culture where such acts of communication are intensely difficult.

Houellebecq notes in his early essay 'Approches du désarroi', that profound communication through literature or 'conversation' that engages a reader's emotion is nearly impossible in an age where the impersonal 'flux informative-publicitaire' is the dominant mode of discourse within culture.¹ In this way, the visceral images of rotting flesh and worms have a dual function in Houellebecq's writing. They certainly act as

¹ Houellebecq, 'Approches du désarroi', p. 45

raw metaphorical symbols for the writer's despair or private depressive suffering, but equally, in their brutality and visceral repulsiveness which have the potential to make an affective impact on – or shock – the reader, can thus be read as urgent symbolic attempts to articulate, communicate and ultimately share this suffering. Notably, the images of incision explored throughout this thesis describe the violent penetration of the surface of the body, which we can read as the metaphorical representation of a search for depth of meaning or sincere communication in the context of the shallowness of the prevailing cultural context. Best and Crowley have described the visceral nature of much contemporary cultural output as attempts to 'articulate from within a crisis of meaning', a description that aptly describes the struggle at the centre of Houellebecq's writing as demonstrated by his frequent use of the repulsive imagery as noted above.² The early poetry explored in the opening chapters of this thesis were initially published under the title 'Quelque chose en moi' in *La Nouvelle Revue de Paris*, an appropriate title for these expressive poems which strive to share the raw emotional experience of the poet's personal suffering with the reader as the writer seeks to exteriorise and communicate his personal 'interior' experience. Furthermore, the continuity of the symbols of raw emotionality with his later fiction – most notably the bloody murder of Houellebecq in *La Carte et le territoire* – clearly suggests that a desire to articulate and share such experiences can be observed throughout his *oeuvre*.

In this way, Houellebecq's writing does not only relate what amount to personal experiences describing the poet's depression. His work can equally be read in terms of how it poses a challenge to the reader and, in doing so, strives to assert the communicative potential of writing he observes as absent from contemporary culture. As such, a tension between the impersonal 'flux informative-publicitaire' of contemporary discourse and this more personal, emotional form of poetic expression is

² Best and Crowley, *The New Pornographies*, p. 15

explicitly demonstrated in Houellebecq's fiction. As previously noted, much of Houellebecq's writing has a characteristically 'plat' and descriptive form, but this frequently belies an acute sensitivity to the textual and emotional potential of poetic language, in terms of both imagery and metre, which is not always immediately evident to a casual reader of Houellebecq's writing or, indeed, many otherwise careful critics of his work. In such a way, since it can be frequently associated with the immediacy of emotion, as considered in the essay 'Renoncer à l'intelligence' examined above,³ poetry has the potential to be powerful, even subversive, within the context of much contemporary, or postmodern, writing which Jameson has described in terms of its emotional 'depthlessness'.⁴ In bringing these hidden emotional depths to the surface, or perhaps more correctly to just below the surface of his writing, Houellebecq affirms the potential of poetry to provide an alternative or an emotional challenge to a bland contemporary culture that is dominated by the shallowness of the discourses of much mainstream fiction, but also by the language of advertising and business. In doing so he implicitly asserts that a degree of emotional depth, or fiction's potential to move a reader, can still be achieved in contemporary fiction, thus challenging Jameson's observation. As noted above, it equally forms a challenge to formalist experiments in writing – particularly the *nouveau roman* – which have often aestheticised experience at the expense of affective response. It is consequently possible to assert that Houellebecq's continued popular success can indeed be described to Bardolle's observation, as noted in the introduction, that 'il génère l'émotion. Il nous touche au cœur, aux tripes, bien davantage qu'au cerveau'.⁵

In this way, the striking and recurrent literary symbols in Houellebecq's writing can be read as attempts to assert the persistence of the reading experience as one

³ He asserts, that '[la poésie] seule [...] peut rendre compte de ce phénomène surprenant: l'amour offre une voie de passage direct entre chair et âme, court-circuitant l'intelligence et le monde des représentations'. Houellebecq, 'Renoncer à l'intelligence', p. 8.

⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 15.

⁵ Bardolle, *La Littérature à vif*, p. 63.

through which genuine emotion can be conveyed. Rather than formal or theoretical experimentation, reading is foregrounded as a rich and immersive experience which forms a contrast with the dominant ‘flux informatico-publicitaire’ and permits the reading subject a degree of escapism or a channel for overcoming their position as an alienated or, to use Houellebecq’s vocabulary, solitary ‘particule élémentaire’ within broader society. In this way, Houellebecq’s fiction operates as an attempt to overcome the challenging state of affairs he notes in ‘Approches du désarroi’, where: ‘les Occidentaux contemporains ne parviennent plus à être des lecteurs; ils ne parviennent plus à satisfaire cette humble demande d’un livre pose devant eux: être simplement des êtres humains, pensant et ressentant par eux-mêmes’.⁶ The visceral images of gouging or incision can be understood concurrently a metaphors for, and attempts to bring about, emotional communication – what Maggie Nelson describes as the ‘shock-and-awe strategies’ deployed in contemporary visual and literary art.⁷

The recurrent symbol of the eye, as considered above with reference to Baron-Cohen’s work on autism, empathy and ‘mindblindness’ in Chapter Two also serves as a pertinent representation of this aspect of Houellebecq’s literary project since it symbolises the communicative role that literature can, and perhaps according to Houellebecq, should play. While eye contact represents mutual understanding in Houellebecq’s work, notably between Michel and Valérie in *Plateforme*, the gouged or damaged eye represents a breakdown in communication and understanding – or a broader lack of empathy. Houellebecq’s technique thus suggests an implicit critical position towards writing. As Houellebecq argues, in contemporary writing, ‘Tout se passe [...] comme si l’expression d’un sentiment, d’une émotion, d’une idée était

⁶ Houellebecq, ‘Approches du désarroi’, p. 40.

⁷ Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty*, p. 5. Nelson also suggests how violent images of incision in modern and contemporary artwork (she suggests Francis Bacon and Sylvia Plath among her examples) can be read both in terms of their viscerality and the ‘truth’ they present, one that can bring about a ‘lightning-flash discovery’ or ‘shift in paradigm’, ‘rendering obsolete an entire mode of seeing, of understanding the world’, p. 206.

devenue impossible'.⁸ In other words, it is possible to suggest that there is a lack of empathy, a widespread manifestation of Baron-Cohen's 'mindblindness' or even, perhaps, a degree of 'autism' itself within the broad logic of contemporary culture against which, Houellebecq's fiction at least partially strives. In making use of his own 'shock-and-awe strategies' in his writing, visceral images reinforced by brutal technique, as well as the rich textures of lyricism and the immersive forms of genre fiction, Houellebecq asserts the potential of literature as a way of expressing the feelings, emotions and ideas he highlights as absent from contemporary culture. In this way, such a state of affairs in literary criticism is highlighted by the work of Jenefer Robinson, who argues that only by fully understanding the emotional dimension of a text can a reader get a complete understanding of it, and that overly or uniquely formalist approaches, risk resulting in partial readings, or a manner of reading that is detached from the emotional significance of a work, one that itself can also be described in terms of its 'mindblindness'. As she suggests, 'a passionless encounter with a work of art, far from being the proper aesthetic way to proceed, may in fact prevent us from understanding in at all'.⁹ Both Houellebecq and Robinson can be seen to diagnose a societal resistance to emotion in the reading process which hampers communication as they both posit reading as a way of overcoming such a state of affairs. Robinson borrows the title of a Flaubert masterpiece to suggest how the realist novel can provide the reader with a 'sentimental education', a goal towards which I suggest Houellebecq's writing equally appears to strive.

While Houellebecq's writing can be read as an attempt to bring about emotional communication, this process is problematic, and it is certainly made complex in his work in a way that makes it a critically rich, and often concurrently a challenging experience for the reader. If communication or immersive 'conversational' experience is

⁸ Houellebecq, 'Approches du désarroi', p. 38.

⁹ Robinson, *Deeper Than Reason*, p. 134.

established by means of the use of poetic technique in Houellebecq's novels, it is also frequently undermined via the provocatively unstable authorial voice in his work. As Robinson demonstrates, a reader judges the appropriateness of his or her emotional responses to a text against the implied author it denotes or connotes. Houellebecq's work, however, often undermines its ability to establish a reader's emotional engagement since he or she, via the traces of authorial presence in the text, is led towards inescapable engagement with the narrative's controversial anti-Islam, misogynistic or even paedophilic asides. There are, perhaps, two potential and ambiguous implications here. On one hand, it is possible that Houellebecq stresses an unpleasant authorial complicity with such attitudes. On the other, it seems that while Houellebecq strives for the 'conversation' outlined in 'Approches du désarroi' in literature, such asides demonstrate that he is only ever partially successful and doomed to remain at the mercy of the broader tension between sincerity and irony described by Best and Crowley, or 'critique and complicity', as a significant trait within contemporary French cultural output.¹⁰

As demonstrated in the final chapter, Houellebecq's writing uses the codes and conventions of the crime novel in order to assert the emotional potential of writing and to bring about the immersion of the reader. As I have considered, these codes are, however, repeatedly subverted and there is often no equivalent overall 'pay-off' in terms of the affective satisfaction that stems from the reader's emotional involvement provided by, for example, the investigating detective's revelatory flourish at the happy resolution of a crime. More broadly, and outside the conventions of genre, the narrative *dénouements* of all of Houellebecq's fiction reflect to some extent the ambiguous closing lines of his poetry in terms of such narrative dissatisfaction. This also results in what amounts to an ambiguous overall tonality to Houellebecq's work – he appears to

¹⁰ Best and Crowley note that many of the works they consider 'express both horror and fascination before social values and aesthetic codes they seem to want to denounce – but with which they seem to remain strangely, perhaps guiltily, entangled'. *The New Pornographies*, p. 13.

demonstrate a desire to engage a reader's emotion in his work, but this engagement is often frustrated, even disappointed.

In terms of both narrative perspective and broader plot events, a paradoxical tension is, then, observable at the heart of Houellebecq's work. In practice, Houellebecq's writing is thus located in what can ultimately be described as an acutely ambivalent position in relation to the emotional capacity of literature. His work clearly displays a willingness to communicate in a direct, emotional and even perhaps sincere way, but this appears to be less ambiguous in his poems which, as considered above, appear to operate in a direct, unfiltered manner. When emotion is engaged with the conventions of linear narrative, the experience – and thus the authenticity of emotion – becomes more complex and frustrating, or even disappointing, for the reader. It is, of course, possible to suggest that frustration and disappointment are amongst the legitimate emotional responses that Houellebecq's work strives to create and they perhaps represent a broader pessimistic statement about the inevitability of frustration and disappointment for the individual subject in contemporary experience. Alternatively, such ambiguous narrative resolutions could be implicit signs of the 'inadequacies' of literature to bring about any authentic pathos without an inescapable degree of ironic subversion, a suggestion that Houellebecq's observations in 'Approches du désarroi' relating to 'l'impossibilité toute contemporain de la *conversation*' in literature have, despite his optimistic attempts to prove otherwise through his fiction, ultimately been proved correct.¹¹

As demonstrated throughout this thesis, the antecedents for Houellebecq's work can be located in a wide range of sources: the French poetic canon (Baudelaire and Lautréamont), some theoretical writing (Cohen), but equally importantly (and largely undervalued), genre fiction (Lovecraft, Jonquet and the *polar*). Given the wide range of

¹¹ Houellebecq, 'Approches du désarroi', p. 38.

the implicit and explicit sources for Houellebecq's work, which also include the female-oriented press,¹² pornography¹³ and daytime French TV,¹⁴ I argue that Houellebecq's critics should think broadly about the contemporary cultural context from within which his style has developed and fully consider the impact of popular culture on his work. Acutely visceral images are, of course, also to be found in the works of other writers. As I have argued above, the poems of Baudelaire, in particular their images of worms and related decomposition, can be read as key intertexts for Houellebecq's work. In addition, Morrey has noted, that the repulsive descriptions of the human body in Houellebecq, recall those of Céline.¹⁵ Visceral images are also notably recurrent within much contemporary French writing. Jonathan Littell's *prix Goncourt*-winning *Les Bienveillantes* (2006), for example, makes extensive use of bloody description to hold the narrating protagonist's implication in Second World War atrocities up for critical consideration.¹⁶ A similar visceral approach can be observed in the novels of Virginie Despentes, particularly *Baise-Moi* (1994), which uses direct and brutal description to reflect the violence recounted by its rape and revenge narrative. More broadly throughout contemporary French fiction, the direct expression of violent acts has been highlighted as a key stylistic trope of what Durand and Mandel have described as novels of the 'contemporary extreme' which, as noted in the above introduction, 'do not merely reflect on violence, they seek it out, engage it and, in a variety of imaginative ways, perform it', but which might not champion the immersive emotional experience to the

¹² See Russell Williams, 'Houellebecq et *L'Idiot international*: la genèse d'une voix littéraire?', *L'Unité de l'œuvre de Michel Houellebecq*, pp. 337-349.

¹³ See Schuerewegen, 'Scènes de cul', in *Michel Houellebecq*, ed. by Sabine van Wesemael.

¹⁴ See Houellebecq's repeated referencing of France 3's quiz show *Questions pour un champion* in *Plateforme* (p. 15) and *La Carte et le territoire* (p. 52).

¹⁵ He notes, for example, that 'There is an almost Célinean horror of loose, saggy flesh in Houellebecq that betrays, beyond the superficial misogyny, a deep anxiety about organic matter, including the author/narrator's own body'. Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, p. 17.

¹⁶ Meyronnis also argues that Littell's and Houellebecq's work share three shocking guiding principles: '*Sexualité impossible, Matricide, Extermination*'. François Meyronnis, *De l'extermination considérée comme un des beaux arts*, p. 50 [italics in original text].

same extent as Houellebecq.¹⁷ In addition, Van Wesemael has noted of the ‘roman transgressive contemporain’, a description that she equally applies to Houellebecq’s work, that its purveyors ‘ont [...] été attaqués pour la violence intolérable de leurs romans, la passivité de leurs personnages, leur nihilisme, leur sexualité pornographique, leur dépravation générale et leur manqué d’esthétique morale’, criticisms that have equally been made of Houellebecq.¹⁸

These characteristics are not restricted to writing in French, and the impact of writing in English on Houellebecq is also notable. A key point of reference for both the writing of the ‘contemporary extreme’ and the ‘roman transgressive contemporain’ is the work of American novelist Bret Easton Ellis whose *American Psycho* (1991) has set a precedent for the broader sphere of contemporary writing in terms of its visceral qualities and what Mandel has described as its ‘notorious’ and ‘extensive descriptions of racism, sexism, rape, torture, murder, mutilation and cannibalism’.¹⁹ Ellis’ novel is indeed an important text with regards to contemporary French writing and Crowley and Best argue that *American Psycho* has had a ‘considerable’ impact on ‘the generation of French writers publishing from the mid-1990s’ in terms of its graphic representations of sex and violence.²⁰ Ellis is also an important point of reference for Houellebecq, one that has been little-considered by his critics, who have perhaps been reluctant to take a comparative approach to his work, and as Bowd notes, as discussed above, have perhaps been too keen to situate Houellebecq only in the French literary canon.²¹

¹⁷ Alain-Philippe Durand and Naomi Mandel, ‘Introduction’ to *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme*, pp. 1-5 (p. 1).

¹⁸ Sabine van Wesemael, *Le Roman transgressif contemporain*, p. 34.

¹⁹ Naomi Mandel, “‘Right Here in Nowheres’”: *American Psycho* and Violence’s Critique’, *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme*, pp. 9-19 (p. 9).

²⁰ Best and Crowley, *The New Pornographies*, p. 13.

²¹ Frédéric Sayer is rare among critics to have drawn parallels between the two writers and has considered how both have articulated an ‘esthétique nihiliste du mal’. Frédéric Sayer, ‘La transformation de symboles du mal en signes du vide chez Michel Houellebecq et Bret Easton Ellis’, in *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, pp. 145-155 (146). The promity between the two writers was also noted by the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*, which interviewed the pair together in an article reprinted in translation in the *Les Inrockuptibles Hors série Houellebecq*: Reiner Traub and Marianne Wellershoff, ‘Le Spectacle de la société’, pp. 68-71.

Houellebecq, a keen reader of Ellis,²² has noted that both writers use their work to ‘viser au plein centre’ or to typically reflect their respective French and American societies.²³ It is, however, also possible to suggest that the bloody violence itself of *American Psycho* also resonates strongly with the frequent visceral suggestions of violence within Houellebecq’s work as considered throughout this thesis. As Best and Crowley have noted, Ellis’ novel is ‘designed to arouse discomfort in the reader’ which, as I have suggested above, is also an observation attributable to Houellebecq’s work.²⁴ More precisely, the bizarrely sadistic *modus operandi* of Houellebecq’s murderer in *La Carte et le territoire* seems to at least some extent to have been directly inspired by the work of Ellis’ serial killer Patrick Bateman.²⁵

As I have suggested above, emotion in Houellebecq does not only emerge in response to scenes of violence. Reading his work in conjunction with his literary predecessors and peers seems to allow us to situate the visceral qualities of Houellebecq’s writing in a broader context, but, aside from Baudelaire, it does not necessarily account for the more atmospheric and lyrical side of his work which, indeed, is less prevalent in such contemporary texts as *Baise-Moi* or *American Psycho*. In conclusion, I would like to propose that there is another context within which Houellebecq’s novels can potentially be situated that provides a potentially pertinent point of comparison for both the visceral and the poetic within Houellebecq’s writing: contemporary French cinema. The filmic context in particular also allows us to take the author’s status as a trained filmmaker into consideration which is, perhaps surprisingly, another aspect infrequently noted by his critics.²⁶ Specifically, Houellebecq’s novels

²² Noguez underlines Houellebecq’s appreciation of Ellis’ work, *Houellebecq, en fait*, p. 163.

²³ Michel Houellebecq, ‘Compte rendu de mission: viser en plein centre’, *Lanzarote et autres textes* (Paris: Libro, 2002), pp. 65-69 (p. 69).

²⁴ Best and Crowley, *The New Pornographies*, p. 13.

²⁵ This naturally warrants closer critical attention than the scope of this thesis allows for.

²⁶ A notable exception here is Matthijs Engelberts who explicitly asserts: ‘Michel Houellebecq est un cinéaste’. Matthijs Engelberts, ‘La Possibilité d’un film. Houellebecq ou le romancier contemporain face au cinéma’, *L’Unité de l’œuvre de Michel Houellebecq*, pp. 375-386 (p. 375). As Demonpion notes, the

can be read alongside examples of what James Quandt has described as the ‘New French Extremity’ in cinema where explicit sex, brutal violence, and frequently a combination of the two, are typically hallmarks of films such as Gaspar Noé’s *Irréversible* (2002), Bruno Dumont’s *Twentynine Palms* (2003), Marina de Van’s *Dans ma peau* (2002) and Philippe Grandrieux’s *Sombre* (1999).²⁷ These films all make use of what Quandt has described as ‘shock tactics’, but also combine subtler and textually richer poetic techniques alongside their affectively engaging visceral detail in a way that reflects Houellebecq’s techniques in writing.

A combination of such contrasting stylistic techniques in these films is noted by Tim Palmer who argues that the films of the New French Extremity frequently make use of critically-overlooked poetic or lyrical visual techniques that run alongside the more immediately striking sex and violence they contain. By way of example, he has suggested that ‘beauty coexists uneasily with brutality’ in the films of Grandrieux and Jacques Nolot’s *La Chatte à deux têtes* (2002).²⁸ Equally, in his consideration of the critical reception of Claire Denis’ *Trouble Every Day* (2001) and the work of Dumont and Noé, Palmer argues that ‘these films have been scrutinized for their subject material but essentially ignored for the specifically cinematic means through which brutal intimacy is actually conveyed’.²⁹ This highlights a critical lacuna around questions of style which, as I have suggested in the introduction to the present study, is equally true of Houellebecq’s work which has also frequently been critically examined more in

author was a student at the prestigious École nationale supérieure Louis-Lumière between 1979 and 1981. Demonpion, *Houellebecq, non autorisé*, p. 99.

²⁷ Quandt has noted the ‘recent tendency to the wilfully transgressive’ in filmmakers such as the above which amounts to a commitment to ‘break every taboo, to wade in rivers of viscera and spumes of sperm, to fill each frame with flesh, nubile or gnarled, and subject it to all manner of penetration, mutilation, and defilement’. James Quandt, ‘Flesh and Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema’, in *The New Extremism in Cinema* ed. by Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 18-25 (p. 18)

²⁸ Tim Palmer, ‘Style and sensation in the contemporary French Cinema of the body’, *Journal of Film and Video*, 58: 8 (2006), 22-32 (p. 25).

²⁹ Palmer, ‘Style and sensation in the contemporary French Cinema of the body’, p. 28.

terms of its controversial or provocative ideas than the specifically literary means in which they are expressed.

As a typical example, Palmer considers de Van's *Dans ma peau* as a film that juxtaposes brutal violence and more poetic techniques. This film is particularly interesting when considered from this perspective since it depicts both contemporary urban spaces such as workplaces and the brutal self-mutilation, as its protagonist appears to undergo a psychological breakdown, that are hallmarks of Houellebecq's writing, as demonstrated above. In particular, and in a way that reflects my reading of Houellebecq's work, Palmer proposes that there is an unrecognised stylistic depth to de Van's film, which also characterises the work of her contemporaries:

There is more [...] to both *Dans ma peau* and the *cinema du corps* than social diagnostics. Like many of its related contemporaries, *Dans ma peau* is also in part an experiment in lyrical cinema. At pivotal moment of [the protagonist's] condition, the film attempts to convey perceptual experience directly on-screen; it deploys poetic aesthetic techniques, sensory impressions that stylistically outrun and strategically overwhelm its narrative.³⁰

In a similar way to Houellebecq's fiction, de Van's film can be read simultaneously on the level of texture and in terms of visceral content. The scene Palmer discusses in the above quote, for example, sees de Van exploit the materiality of the visual image through 'immersive formal strategies' which move the film towards 'becoming a "pure" cinema of non-representational collage',³¹ what Olivier de Bruyn describes as a 'poetics of pain'.³² Such formal techniques are reminiscent of Houellebecq's fiction which, as considered above in Chapters Two and Three of this study, regularly makes use of

³⁰ Here, Palmer refers to the 'cinema du corps', his term for what can be understood along similar lines to Quandt's 'New French Extremity'. Tim Palmer, 'Under your skin: Marina de Van and the contemporary French cinema du corps', *Studies in French Cinema*, 6:3 (2006), 171-181 (p. 178).

³¹ Palmer describes how 'Just before [the protagonist] Esther's climactic breakdown, for example, as she flees from an urban environment that is suddenly registered as claustrophobic and threatening, de Van's stylistic design becomes radically amorphous. On the soundtrack, the aural balance and tone shift abruptly, rendering the noise of supermarkets and shoppers as muted, discordant and obscure. The image jumps between fast and normal motion, with passers-by blurring past Esther in distorted point-of-view shots. The camera racks focus unevenly, as planes of colour, bright light and texture collide and juxtapose. Most jarringly of all, the film then shifts to a three minute split screen sequence of paired handheld images that represent Esther's state of withdrawal'. 'Under your skin: Marina de Van and the contemporary French cinema du corps', p. 179.

³² Olivier de Bruyn, 'Dans ma peau: corps à corps', *Positif*, 502, 26-27 (p. 27), cited in Palmer, 'Under your skin: Marina de Van and the contemporary French cinema du corps', p. 179.

poetic language using, for example, the alexandrines of verified poetry within his prose or asyndetic juxtaposition in techniques which themselves similarly ‘stylistically outrun’ his narratives.

Another point of pertinent comparison between the New French Extremity films and Houellebecq’s writing is how both bodies of work typically frustrate, complicate or render the respective experiences of viewing and reading uncomfortable. As I have argued above in Chapter Three, the emotional identification a reader is able to make with Houellebecq’s fiction is frequently undermined by the ambiguities of protean authorial presence. Equally, as I have demonstrated in Chapter Four, a reader’s overall satisfaction is frequently subverted within Houellebecq, particularly in comparison with the constraints of genre fiction narratives from which they, at least partially, appear to draw. On cinema, Palmer notes that many mainstream and art house films are structured around similarly rigid conventions such as: ‘sympathetic characters that develop, talking us through their problems in order to solve them; carefully plotted scenarios with inevitably positive resolutions [and] underlying social problems that are tidily surveyed and usually surmounted’.³³ As I have suggested in the previous chapter, through reference to Holmes’ work on bestselling fiction, this is also frequently true of the mainstream popular novel. Houellebecq’s work, however, repeatedly subverts such constraints, and risks frustrating or surprising the reader or making his or her identification with, or immersion in, the text problematic. Likewise, the films associated with New French Extremity also similarly manipulate the constraints of genre. Tina Kendall, for example, argues that Pascal Laugier’s *Martyrs* (2008) crucially subverts the conventions of the horror genre in a key structural twist towards the end of the film.³⁴

³³ Tim Palmer, ‘Style and sensation in the contemporary French Cinema of the body’, p. 28.

³⁴ Tina Kendall, ‘French Horror and the New Sincerity: Pascal Laugier’s *Martyrs*’, unpublished conference paper delivered at Society for French Studies Conference, 1 July 2013, University of Nottingham.

Equally, Dumont's *Twentynine Palms* can be read in terms of how it concurrently both plays homage to and ultimately subverts the American road movie.

In addition to polarising the critical responses to their work,³⁵ Houellebecq's writing is perhaps most significantly related to the films of the New French Extremity in the way both bodies of work present ambivalent or conclusively undecidable narrative attitudes to or perspectives on the material they present. As noted above, Best and Crowley highlight an 'ambivalent combination of critique and collusion' in the overall narrative perspectives of much contemporary cultural output which accurately describes both Houellebecq's work as well as much contemporary French cinema.³⁶ Such positions can frustrate critical efforts to discover, or indeed impose, a satisfyingly coherent or straightforward 'line' or ideological standpoint within artworks. Kendall notes a similar undecidability and observed a 'dialectic between postmodern irony and sincerity' in contemporary filmmaking.³⁷ In Houellebecq's case, of course, this has been exemplified by the *affaire* surrounding the *Perpendiculaire* journal considered above but it has equally been noted throughout this thesis with reference, for example, to his fiction's unstable attitude to pathos. A similar dialectic to that noted by Kendall is present in Houellebecq's texts' overall attitude to genre fiction since the tone of his writing tends to hover ambiguously between sincere homage and parodic *détournement*. Perhaps most notably, as I have demonstrated in Chapter Three, the ambiguities of narrative perspective in Houellebecq's work result in an acute undecidability which, as I have argued, is particularly critically pressing with regards to the problematic manner Islam and paedophilia are treated therein.

Visceral tropes, or sex, violence and controversy, are also, of course, not limited to cinema and can be observed as somewhat symptomatic of the broader end-of-the-twentieth-century contemporary French cultural imagination. Writing about the New

³⁵ Palmer, 'Style and sensation in the contemporary French Cinema of the body', p. 32.

³⁶ Best and Crowley, *The New Pornographies*, p. 15.

³⁷ Kendall, 'French Horror and the New Sincerity: Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs*'.

French Extremity, film journalist Jonathan Romney suggests that these films have their heritage in French literature, citing the influence of Sade, La Fontaine and Georges Bataille on contemporary extreme output.³⁸ Romney also notes that contemporary writing, he highlights Houellebecq, Despentes and Darrieussecq, also has extreme qualities that, we can suggest, form something approaching an osmotic relationship with contemporary film. Quant also speculates that New French Extremity can in film can be associated with ‘a short-lived resurgence of the violational tradition of French culture [...] reflected in contemporaneous literature (e.g. Michel Houellebecq, Catherine Millet, Marie Darrieussecq, Jonathan Littell)’.³⁹ Indeed, such an assertion would appear to be reinforced by Durand, Mandel and van Wesemael as considered above. A specific ‘moment’ at the end of twentieth-century French culture, what Cruickshank has expressed in terms of its ‘aesthetics of crisis’ can certainly be seen to have contaminated both contemporary film and literary production.⁴⁰

Michel Houellebecq is a highly significant French cultural phenomenon. His impact, as I have demonstrated, can be located outside literature, both through his other artistic collaborations and how the provocative ideas of his fiction have been much discussed in critical and media spheres. The present study has, however, sought to refocus critical inquiry on the novels themselves, and, particularly, on the style of his writing or the means by which the provocative ideas of his work are expressed. A persistent theme in this thesis is the role and value of literary fiction. Houellebecq has, in an essay, stressed his voracious appetite for reading and in particular his appreciation of the immersive qualities of literature:

Et quelle fascinante saloperie, quand même, que la littérature... Si pernicieuse, puissante, incroyablement plus puissante que le cinéma, plus pernicieuse, même,

³⁸ Jonathan Romney, ‘Le sex and violence’, *Independent on Sunday*, 12 September 2004, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/le-sex-and-violence-6161908.html>> [accessed 18 December, 2013].

³⁹ James Quandt, ‘More Moralism from that “wordy fuck”’, in *The New Extremism in Cinema*, pp. 209-213 (p. 213).

⁴⁰ Cruickshank, *Fin de millénaire French fiction*.

que la musique.⁴¹

By proposing a reading of Houellebecq's work that is not necessarily limited to the French nineteenth century or a thinking through of the author's philosophical ideas, this thesis has provided a practical demonstration of the complex techniques by which Houellebecq has succeeded in placing the experience of reading and the reader at the very heart of his fiction in a way that vividly reasserts both its power and, as he highlights in the above quote, its undoubtedly pernicious potential. Most recently, Houellebecq has published 2015's *Soumission* which has provoked a media furore for its provocative consideration of the role of Islam within France. Despite the text's broad political focus, and its apparent movement away from the lyricism and poetic language of his earlier fiction, *Soumission* presents a similar conception of literature to his earlier writings. In the opening pages, Houellebecq's narrator asserts that '[...] seule la littérature peut vous donner cette sensation de contact avec un autre esprit humain, avec l'intégralité de cet esprit, ses faiblesses et ses grandeurs, ses limitations, ses petites, ses idées fixes, ses croyances; avec tout ce qui l'émeut, l'intéresse, l'excite ou lui répugne'.⁴² Here, the text also explicitly describes literature explicitly in terms of a 'conversation' between reader and writer as in his early essay 'Approches du désarroi'. A serious critical consensus has yet to develop around *Soumission* but, as this thesis has argued, it appears that critics will need to take this aspect of Houellebecq's writing into consideration to fully appreciate this text and his other work.

⁴¹ Houellebecq, 'J'ai lu toute ma vie', *Interventions 2*, pp. 269-273 (p. 270).

⁴² Houellebecq, *Soumission*, p. 13.

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