

Michel Houellebecq's Novel Precarities: Literature That Leads Nowhere

Victor E. Taylor

The academic study of literature leads basically nowhere, as we all know, unless you happen to be an especially gifted student, in which case it prepares you for a career teaching the academic study of literature – it is, in other words, a rather farcical system that exists solely to replicate itself and yet manages to fail more than 95 percent of the time. Still, it's harmless, and can even have a certain marginal value. A young woman applying for a sales job at Céline or Hermès should naturally attend to her appearance above all; but a degree in literature can constitute a secondary asset, since it guarantees the employer, in the absence of any useful skills, a certain intellectual agility that could lead to professional development – besides which, literature has always carried positive connotations in the world of luxury goods.

Michel Houellebecq, *Submission: A Novel*.

Why should the “academic study of literature” lead anywhere . . . at all? And, why should the “academic study of literature” find or be required to find a value exclusively in a neoliberal, hyper-monetizing economy? And, why couldn’t one instead see the “academic study of literature” as an activity that foundationally challenges rather than obsequiously affirms the truly “farcical system” that produces the notion of “luxury goods” in the first place? These “against the grain” questions, as I have posed them, reveal what emerges as a Houellebecqian “double take” on or a Houellebecqian process of ironic reversal of uncritical assumptions and forms of cultural stupidity (in the Flaubertian sense); and, it is this critical and sometimes radical second look that we see attending François’s rolling sarcastic and cynical pronouncements on literature, culture, politics, and theology/religion throughout the work, especially in *Submission’s* final ridiculous section on the impetus for a conditional (and therefore paradoxical) religious conversion. Moreover, the “double take” in Houellebecq’s works exposes crisscrossing conditions of precarity – the precarity of persons, institutions, and ideas.

The imagined literature student in the epigraph from *Submission* is made vulnerable not by her lack of knowledge but by her supposedly useless knowledge, which is posited as merely augmenting her sales related skill-set at “Céline or Hermès.” A second look at François’ explication of the scene of literature, however, shows that having been led “nowhere” in the study of literature actually opens a productive space, potentially, to see and to question conditions of precarity across diverse discursive registers and not just a *caisse enregistreuse* (cash register). What first appears as a condemnation of a knowledge leading “nowhere” returns through a “double take” or ironic reversal as an opportunity to theoretically examine multiple forms of existential extremity, personal, cultural, historical, and theological. This, as we will see, is the critical feature of a Houellebecqian novel.

Houellebecq’s *Submission: A Novel* charts several trajectories of precarity; it is in many respects a novel dedicated to exploring various forms of endangerment and vulnerability – from France’s democratic republic being threatened by nihilistic secularism and then by Islamic rule to François’ alcoholism and sexual hyper-activity jeopardizing his life

and career. These susceptibilities are prefigured early in the novel as the narrator opines on the futility of literature and the precarity of a life built around the creation and formal study of the field.

François' personal and professional worlds dysfunctionally revolve around the works of the nineteenth century writer and "low-ranking" civil servant Joris-Karl Huysmans. François describes him as a "friend more than a hundred years later"¹ and identifies with his "human spirit," the capturing of which seems to be the only saving grace of literary studies:

[L]ike literature, painting has the power to astonish, and to make you see the world through fresh eyes. But only literature can put you in touch with another human spirit, as a whole, with all its weaknesses and grandeurs, its limitations, its pettinesses, its obsessions, its beliefs; with whatever it finds moving, interesting, exciting, or repugnant. Only literature can grant you access to a spirit from beyond the grave – a more direct, more complete, deeper access than you'd have in conversation with a friend. Even in our deepest, most lasting friendships, we never speak so openly as when we face a blank page and address an unknown reader. The beauty of an author's style, the music of his sentences, have their importance in literature, of course; the depth of an author's reflections, the originality of his thought, certainly can't be overlooked; but an author is above all a human being, present in his books, and whether he writes very well or very badly hardly matters – as long as he gets the books written and is, indeed, present in them.²

It is fairly easy to see François' (Houellebecq's) "double take" on literature in the novel's opening. The "academic study of literature" is, as I stated earlier, seen as a folly, but in the context of "another human spirit" it rises above the other arts . . . even to the point that it makes no difference whether the books are "very well" or "very badly" written as long as the author is "present in them." It is this being "present" that I define as a form of precarity, a shared vulnerability between author and reader. Perhaps this is the appropriate response for François' ensuing dismissive view of literary studies – there is no economic purpose to being actually "present" in a "sales job" but being "present" may be necessary for

studying literature. In fact, life, for François, outside of literary studies is wholly lacking in this recognition of shared precarity – co-presence. His transactional sexual hyper-activity demonstrates this *ad nauseum* in the novel and his misanthropic perspective on the world at-large speaks to a form of postmodern nihilism that is a staple of Houellebecq's works in general. It is François' inability to meaningfully connect to people (mostly living), the world, and anything in it that marks or exposes his thinly disguised vulnerability. He only acerbates his precarity by insisting on the radical emptiness of all things, most significantly religion, especially Catholicism which he appreciates ultimately as a series of historically based mechanical gestures. In this sense, Houellebecq's caustic nihilism appears through a largely parodic presentation of characters and conflicts – most of which are spinning in a postmodern void of meaninglessness.

In *Submission*, France in 2022 is in a state of irreversible social and cultural decay and so too is western civilization. The prevailing, post-Enlightenment ideologies and their accompanying moribund institutions that have been sustaining the social network are quickly fading and François, the embodiment of this dis-ease, is precariously drifting in the cross-currents of professional non-engagement and personal malaise. Of course, what modern or postmodern western novel wouldn't have this as the quasi-dystopian backdrop to the narrative? The answer is none or very few. For Houellebecq, however, the novel's not-to-distant bleak future is not crafted to be ultimately resolved or reclaimed by history or art. Here, François is partially correct – we are led “nowhere” in literature and, by extension, “nowhere” in the novel. In fact, like his other works, especially *The Possibility of an Island*, which fits the sci-fi/futuristic genre more specifically, the irredeemable future world creates the opportunity to explore the extremes of human precarity or, as in the case of Daniel or Daniels, human/clone precarity, more carefully and more disturbingly. While François and Daniel(s) share many virtues and vices, it is necessary here that I simply underscore their respective precarities – both endure and live in unresolvable vulnerability.

While *Submission* focuses on the precarity of characters, perhaps even with François as a stand-in for Houellebecq, the real-life

circumstances of the novel's publication have shaped how precarity is viewed politically and culturally. Coincidentally released on the morning of the January 7th, 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* terror attack, *Submission*, which, of course, translates to "Islam" in Arabic, became a lightning rod for criticism and, for some on the fascist right, a gift in the form of a supposed future-revealing literary omen. In the moment of its release, one could ask, was *Submission* a dire and timely warning from one of France's most celebrated and culturally astute writers? Or, was *Submission* coincidentally a post-terror attack criticism of readers who too eagerly look to over-hyped, celebrated, and culturally astute writers for simple answers to complex political, social, and existential questions?³ In this context, *Submission*, like *The Possibility of an Island*, has a speculative, futuristic element. Yes, the reader is given a world that is set in the future but that world is ironically too close to fit the sci-fi demand for allegory. So, if Houellebecq is offering a futuristic vision, it is a vision of a future just around the temporal corner, which is consistent with Houellebecq's tendencies to give and take away interpretative footholds in the text. His description of the political landscape, for instance, reads like an analysis piece from the *Huffington Post* – matter of factly laying out the tic-toc of what led to the present electoral moment.

Over the years, the rise of the far right had made things a little more interesting. It gave the debates a long-lost frisson of fascism. Still, it wasn't until 2017, and the presidential runoff, that things really started to heat up. The foreign press looked on, bewildered, as a leftist president was reelected in a country that was more and more openly right-wing: the spectacle was shameful but mathematically inevitable. Over the next few weeks a strange, oppressive mood settled over France, a kind of suffocating despair, all-encompassing but shot through with glints of insurrection. People even chose to leave the country. Then, a month after the elections, Mohammed Ben Abbes announced the creation of the Muslim Brotherhood. There had already been one attempt to form an Islamic party, the French Muslim Party, but it soon fell apart over the embarrassing anti-Semitism of its leader – so extreme that it drove him into an alliance with the far right. The

Muslim Brotherhood learned its lesson and was careful to take a moderate line. It soft-pedaled its support of the Palestinians and kept up good relations with the Jewish religious authorities. As with Muslim Brotherhood parties in the Arab world – and the French Communists before them – the real political action was carried out through a network of youth groups, cultural institutions, and charities. In a country gripped by ever more widespread unemployment, the strategy broadened the Brotherhood's reach far beyond strictly observant Muslims. Its rise was nothing short of meteoric. After less than five years, it was now polling just behind the Socialists: at 21 versus 23 percent. As for the traditional right, the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) had plateaued at 14 percent. The National Front, with 32 percent, remained far and away the leading party of France⁴.

The apparent surprising secret to the Islamic annexation of France was the Muslim Brotherhood's ability to forge status quo agreements across the political spectrum, with religious education and the "family" as its primary concern, especially restrictions on women's participation in society. So, as in the case of most extreme irrational fears or phobias, we learned that nothing really all that bad happens when the scary moment arises, e.g. "I walked under a ladder. So what?" or "France is an Islamic republic. Okay." Quite sarcastically, François observes that everything functions rather normally even though the Sorbonne has been acquired by the Saudis and reorganized as a faith-based institution (Université Islamique Paris–Sorbonne), plural marriage (for men) is legalized, and women must abide by Islamic social codes. With those few *minor* social adjustments, France is perfectly fine. Of course, the reader cannot overlook Houellebecq's sarcasm (even though he often makes outrageous misogynist comments in his works and interviews).⁵ So, there are several interpretative lines to pursue in the context of general precarity, which may describe the generic "nowhere" to which literature, in particular the novel, ineluctably leads.

First, *Submission*, for the far-right, nativist, reader, is an urgent warning about the rise of Islam and the decline of the west. France, in this view, is being made fatally precarious by secularism, open

immigration, and social permissiveness – many of the same social complaints that led to the founding of the Republic of Gilead (formerly the USA) in Hulu's popular series *The Handmaid's Tale*. Precarity and the fear of precarity drive this novel-as-bad-omen interpretation that understands *Submission* as a very real, albeit fictional, premonition of a society to come if political figures like “Marine” Le Pen, who makes a significant appearance in the novel, and her National Front don't take charge of government immediately.

In *Without God: Michel Houellebecq and Materialist Horror*, Louis Betty writes that “what did seem clear initially – and not only to the French president – was that Houellebecq's novel played into cultural paranoia about Islam, terrorism, and national and civilizational decline; it would provide a symbol and a weapon for European nativist groups, such as Germany's Pegida, worried about the loss of national, racial, and religious identity.”⁶ The fear of the other, in particular the Islamic other, magnifies this Houellebecqian sense of vulnerability, which plays itself out, as Betty notes, in global anti-global, nativist/faux populist movements, e.g. Brexit, American Trumpism.

The second response to Houellebecqian precarity requires a “double take” on the Islamophobic, pro-nativist reading. While François seems mostly ambivalent early on about Islam and the transformation of France into an Islamic republic, he also takes a critical perspective on secularism, which isn't the acceptable less perfect binary choice next to an Islamic theocracy. Clearly, for François, the vacuous celebrity-based culture of France (western democracies) is nothing to cherish, defend, or perpetuate. As Betty states:

At its most essential, *Submission* is a rebuke of two forms of liberalism that Houellebecq has consistently portrayed as inimical to human happiness: the first, sexual liberalism, has ruined marriage and compromised the basic unit of social life, the family; and the second, epistemological liberalism, frees man from divine command and thus subjects the “truth” to competition and the corroding and secularizing forces of relativism. *Submission's* Muslim Brotherhood, while leaving economic freedom untouched (153), recognizes the mischief that these other two forms of

liberation have wrought in the West – and the group responds accordingly. And it is François, embodying the anxiety of these freedoms, though acutely incapable of reaction against them, who represents at once the Islamic regime's foil and its *raison d'être*.⁷ There is no triumph of an imperfect secularism at the end of *Submission*. In this context, precarity is further extended into the failure of western democracies, which are exposed as just as politically and socially inadequate as any possible theocracy, Islamic, medieval Christian, or other. Additionally, one could go so far as to read François as a “devil's advocate” for the Islamic republic insofar as Islam presumably eradicates the perceived ills of social secularism and liberalism – the cost of which is mostly paid by women who are forced in the novel to retreat from civic, economic, intellectual, and political life.

The third response is more nuanced and requires more interpretative uncertainty. If *Submission* is not a literary premonition about the expansion of Islam into France and it is not a “lesser of two evils” assessment or an outright rejection of western secularism and liberalism, then what is it? The obvious answer is that it is a novel, a literary work, that leads “nowhere,” but it is not utopian or dystopian. “The key to understanding *Submission*,” according to Louis Betty, lies instead in François's conditional conversion at the close of the novel.”⁸ Betty focuses on the conversion scene for two reasons; first, he notes that Houellebecq had intended to title the novel *La Conversion* rather than *Soumission*, which may show the author's desired emphasis; second, the mirrored lives of François and Huysmans, with the latter converting to Catholicism. As much as religious conversion seems to resolve the tensions and ambiguities in the novel, it is abundantly clear that François' “conditional conversion,” as Betty describes it, settles nothing or settles nothing short of a glimpse of François' possible ironic life as a Muslim convert.

If François finds secularism and liberalism so wanting, then what is it about Robert Rediger's (the novel's “tall, powerfully built” rector of the “new” Sorbonne, major pitch-man for the new Islamic republic, and best-selling author of *Ten Questions About Islam* – three million copies sold at one hundred and twenty-eight pages, with “lots of pictures”) odd version

of Islam that is so compelling. The answer is nothing other than as a perk for being among the “intellectual elite” François would have social and economic privileges and not be excluded from the opportunity for a polygamous marriage (the outrageous “natural selection” justification made by Rediger asserting that *many* women should have the privilege to be married to an extraordinary man⁹).

Rediger’s Islam, as he self-reflectively notes, parallels the *Story of O*, with its masochistic, asymmetrical power performances: “I hesitate to discuss the idea with my fellow Muslims, who might consider it sacrilegious, but for me there’s a connection between woman’s submission to man, as it’s described in *Story of O*, and the Islamic idea of man’s submission to God.”¹⁰ Here, Rediger mouths a Žižekian moment of cynical, obscene ideology – I know better but I do it anyway. Moreover, for Rediger, who lives in Dominique Aury’s (Anne Desclos, 1907-1998) house, Islam is an expedient place-holder for contrary mysteries; it is, from his self-advancing point of view, an ambiguous “poetic” exercise in which “sound and sense can be made one, and so can speak the world.”¹¹ In other words, Rediger can comfortably occupy all kinds of contradictions and inconsistencies with ease, knowing that all is given “sense” in “oneness.”

François describes Rediger’s arguments as “well-rehearsed” and “strong,” but this, of course, requires a “double take.” “Well-rehearsed” can be understood as a well-performed sales pitch (François notes how Rediger is a flatterer) and “strong”¹² interpreted as in being simple, easy-to-follow, superficial, and predicated on the abusive social mechanisms of domination: “But still, even if his arguments were well rehearsed, that didn’t take away from their strength. And look at how he lived: a forty-year-old wife to do the cooking, a fifteen-year-old wife for whatever else ... No doubt he had one or two wives in between, but I couldn’t think how to ask.”¹³ And this is the essential detail that preoccupies François, Rediger’s uncounted wives. In fact, of the one hundred and twenty plus pages of Rediger’s *Ten Questions on Islam*, François skips over most it, focusing “like most men . . . on chapter 7: ‘Why Polygamy?’”¹⁴ So, one cannot take François’ conversion (or Rediger’s) seriously or overlook Houellebecq’s self-preserving skepticism regarding human nature and the critical view

he takes of the lengths that people, especially academics, will go to advance and secure their own (pathological) narcissistic interests – it is all too ridiculous and François' previous legitimate and authentic precarity is fig-leaved over by his sexual/power fantasies framed by the easily available politico-cultural acceptance of polygamy:

He smiled again. "You know ... That afternoon we spent at my house, we discussed metaphysics, the creation of the universe, et cetera. I'm well aware that this is not, generally speaking, what interests men; but as you were just saying, the real subjects are embarrassing to bring up. Even now, here we are discussing natural selection – we're trying to keep things on an elevated plane. Obviously, it's very hard to come out and ask, What will you pay me? How many wives do I get?" "I already have some kind of idea about the pay." "Well, that's basically what determines the number of wives. According to Islamic law, wives have to receive equal treatment, which imposes certain constraints in terms of housing. In your case, I think you could have three wives without too much trouble – not that anyone would force you to, of course."¹⁵

Again, the Houellebecqian "double take" allows us to see the ludicrous nature of Rediger's comment. It is all contained within a cynical proposition, which François "of course" could refuse – negotiate for one or two wives rather than three, perhaps? Whatever *best* preserves their "equal treatment." This underscores the "nowhere" of literary studies in that *Submission* refuses to submit to a final "making one" of meaning. The Islam presented in the novel is corrupt and used as a poorly disguised tool to perpetuate the domination by an elite class at the expense of others (subalterns), mainly women. The nihilism swallowing François early on in the novel is parodically postmodern and largely self-indulgent. The hope for a remedy or uneasy balance of meaning and meaninglessness is pre-empted by the power of social contradictions. What remains is the "nowhere" of precarity in all its forms – a condition that is *the* condition of existence and which cannot be alleviated . . . only accepted and understood as shared, which François forces himself simultaneously to see and not to see.

Betty, I think, is correct in viewing the conversion as key to *Submission*, which is conditional and predicated on an ironic distance from that to which François is converting. I would add to this argument the capacity for self-awareness of the self-deception required to carry it out. Rediger and François are fooling no one, much less themselves in their performed adherence to Islam. It is between to the two them that we see the system of ironic reversals at work. François wants to make sure that his wives are attractive and he is very concerned about the abaya or other clothing obstructing his body-preference assessment. Rediger, of course, is quick to put his anxiety to rest by pointing out that “matchmakers” (women) are allowed to see the “girls naked”:

We know that men, given the chance to choose for themselves, will all make exactly the same choice. That's why most societies, especially Muslim societies, have matchmakers. It's a very important profession, reserved for women of great experience and wisdom. As women, obviously, they are allowed to see girls naked, and so they conduct a sort of evaluation, and correlate the girls' physical appearance with the social status of their future husbands. In your case, I can promise, you'd have nothing to complain about...”¹⁶

In François' final and putative theological musing, Islam or the prospect of converting to Islam *would* not be the passage toward a spiritual liberation or a meaningful counter-existence to his secular, atheistic life. It *would* be (in the future/conditional) an ironic fulfillment of his secular, atheistic, and largely libidinal desires. The novel's “submission” is less about religion and more about a teetering, self-deluding capitulation to the baseness of human nature – a human nature driven to mitigate anxieties around its ever-returning precarity or unconditional lack. In this sense, François' submission is his conversion to the simplicity of his libidinal desire, which is the novel's achievement . . . to lead nowhere except back to an instance of irresolvable vulnerability and disconnection. In the final passages the reader sees the irony of the French Islamic republic, a republic that fulfills the contradictory excessive desires of liberalism and secularism more effectively than these political ideologies themselves are able to do.

François, contemplating a future life with no connection to the past and with nothing to “mourn,” dreams of fulfilling his desire post-conversion:

A few months later there would be new classes and new students – pretty, veiled, shy. I don’t know how students find out which teachers are famous, but they always, inevitably, did, and I didn’t think things could be so different now. Each of these girls, no matter how pretty, would be happy and proud if I chose her, and would feel honored to share my bed. They would be worthy of love; and I, for my part, would come to love them.”¹⁷

Doesn’t this sentiment underscore François’ precarity... his pathetic attempt to overcome his chronic disconnectedness? An attempt that will fail against the resurrection of his ingrained nihilism? With this “conditional conversion” or qualified conversion, in the future, Houellebecq leaves us “nowhere” except in the recurring loop of precarity.

¹ Michel Houellebecq, *Submission: A Novel*, Trans. Lorin Stein. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2015, 6.

² Ibid, 4-5.

³ Eric Banks, “Public Anomie: Provocateur Michel Houellebecq’s Latest Novel Arrives in America.” *BookForum*, vol. 22. 4, 2016. 25-26.

⁴ Ibid, 38-39.

⁵ See Louis Betty’s *Without God: Michel Houellebecq and Materialist Horror*.

“The atmosphere of sanctimony and recrimination that has surrounded the publication of Houellebecq’s novels is remarkable, and even the critics most engaged with his work have been careful to issue the requisite condemnation of the author’s seemingly egregious neglect of political decency. Murielle Lucie Clément, for example, writes in her article ‘*Le héros houellebecquien*’, ‘The day has come to realize that what we may take to be hilarious witticisms is none other than an ideology deeply rooted in xenophobia, racism, and misogyny’ (2006, 97, my translation). Little good is accomplished by trying to defend Houellebecq against such accusations. I only suggest that the sexism, racism, xenophobia, and perhaps homophobia that somewhat more than intermittently crop up in Houellebecq’s novels ought to be subsumed under a general misanthropy; the real interest of his writing lies elsewhere” (Kindle Locations 318-324).

⁶ Betty, Louis. *Without God: Michel Houellebecq and Materialist Horror* (Kindle Locations 2442-2444). Penn State University Press. Kindle Edition.

⁷ Ibid, 2560-2600.

⁸ Ibid, 2770-3480.

⁹ Houellebecq, Michel. *Submission: A Novel* (pp. 219-220). Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Kindle Edition:

“When it came to living beings, however, the Creator expressed himself through natural selection, which allowed animate creatures to achieve their maximum beauty, vitality, and power. And for all animal species, including man, the law was the same: only certain individuals would be chosen to pass on their seed, to conceive the next generation, on which an infinite number of generations depended. In the case of mammals, if you compared the female, with her long gestation period, to the male, with his essentially limitless capacity to reproduce, it was clear that the pressures of selection would fall principally on the males. If some males enjoyed access to several females, others would necessarily have none. So this inequality between males should be considered not a negative side effect of polygamy but rather its goal. It was how the species achieved its destiny.”

¹⁰ Houellebecq, 2015. 212.

¹¹ Ibid, 211.

¹² Houellebecq, Michel. *Submission: A Novel* (pp. 224-225). Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Kindle Edition:

“Only religion, the article tried to show, could create a total relationship between individuals. Think of an X-Y graph, Rediger wrote, with individuals (points) linked according to their personal relationships: it is impossible to construct a graph in which each individual is linked to every other. The only solution is to create a higher plane, containing one point called God, to which all of the individuals can be linked – and linked to one another, through this intermediary. All that stuff made for very good reading; even though geometrically his proof didn’t make any sense, it took my mind off my plumbing.”

¹³ Ibid, 213.

¹⁴ Ibid, 217.

¹⁵ Ibid, 240.

¹⁶ Ibid, 241.

¹⁷ Ibid, 245-246.