

# The Political Reception of Michel Houellebecq's *Submission*

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In 2015, French writer Michel Houellebecq's novel *Submission*, which depicts a future France with a Muslim president, was repeatedly cited in political discourse about Islam, French identity, and terrorism. In the year of the novel's publication, several Islamist terrorist attacks targeted France, and Houellebecq was often named in the debate on multiculturalism, immigration and the French secularist principle of *laïcité*. The reception of the novel is analysed in this article, focusing on ideological argumentation and political debate. Two opposite camps can be identified in this reception structure. Interestingly, the arguments of these camps are analogous to the arguments of the prosecutor and defence lawyer in the 1857 trial of Gustave Flaubert concerning his novel *Madame Bovary*. One and a half centuries after that trial, questions about the reader's moral capacity and the author's responsibility remain at the heart of the debate. While some liberal critics praise the ambiguities of the novel, trusting the reader's ethical faculties, other critics condemn the novel and accuse the writer of expressing dubious values. As for the ideological homes of these critics, the liberal group represents left-wing, right-wing, and uncertain ideologies, whereas the gatekeeping group largely consists of left-leaning agents. The division into two reception groups and their respective discursive patterns and practices are analysed using the *Bovary* trial as a basis for comparison. It is concluded that in the anxious political climate of 2015 when terror, migration, and Islam were attracting considerable attention and when the populist right was on the rise, Houellebecq's novel functioned as a political vehicle in government-sympathetic opinion making and as a practical tool for critics who positioned themselves as safeguarding generous migration and integration policies.

## Introduction

On 7 January 2015, Michel Houellebecq's new novel, *Submission*, had just reached the bookstores when two Islamist terrorists attacked the offices of the satirical journal *Charlie Hebdo*, killing 12 people and injuring 11. What happened next is

illustrative of Houellebecq's controversial position in France. The French Prime Minister Manuel Valls, in an attempt to rally the nation and embolden its citizens, first declared that the murderous attack against *Charlie Hebdo* was terrible and that France must learn from it; then he linked the country's misery to Michel Houellebecq: 'But this is also an opportunity to say no to prejudice, intolerance, and hatred – to the discourses that traumatize our nation. France is not Michel Houellebecq. France is not intolerance, hatred, and fear'.<sup>1,2</sup> According to France's ruling Prime Minister during this year of terror, Houellebecq and his novel deserved to be associated with fear, hatred and intolerance – the designated enemies of the Republic – and the causes of terrorist violence. One and a half years later, the novel was still politically relevant, as Parliamentary Deputy Guillaume Larrivé invoked Houellebecq's 'deceitfully sympathetic' ('faussement sympathique') character Ben Abbes – the Muslim president in *Submission* – in advocating the restriction of religious freedom in France.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore necessary to discuss the reception of Michel Houellebecq's novel *Submission* from a political standpoint. And the fact that politicians have referred to the novel in their speeches is not the only reason. Interestingly, scholars and critics have drawn ethical and societal conclusions and articulated political responses that disregard the special conditions attributed to literary discourse at least since the Romantic era; namely, the ambiguous relationship to historical truth, the lack of preconceived effects on society, and the primacy of form over meaning. The fact that fictional characters and scenarios can become elements of political debates and legislative processes is an argument for treating Houellebecq's novel as an example of the contemporary trend of blurring or renegotiating the boundaries between fiction and reality, and literary and political discourse. In this article, the criticism of *Submission* will be treated as a manifestation of this contemporary paradigm of discursive hybridity. The study will keep two apparently contradictory presuppositions in mind: those of repetition and surprise. I will address both the fact that the same arguments and positions were manifested in the reception of *Submission* as were expressed in the 1857 trial of Gustave Flaubert concerning *Madame Bovary* and the fact that Houellebecq's novel surprises and destabilizes its audience, being described as provocative and dangerous and entering the political sphere in subversive and unanticipated ways. These presuppositions lead to the hypothesis that the critics' impression of novelty, decadence and danger is illusory and/or untruthful. Although contemporary society's habit of mixing politics and literature may appear new, confusing and increasingly widespread, it repeats the same conflict between aesthetic and moral/political reading modes as was observed 160 years ago. This article is arranged as follows. First, the reception will be divided into two main camps: the discourse of resistance representing the standpoint of Flaubert's prosecutor, and the liberal discourse that echoes the position of his defence lawyer. Houellebecq's own positioning will then be discussed along with sociological contextual details such as sales figures, prizes and media coverage. Finally, I will follow up on the hypothesis just introduced.

### Ideological Gatekeepers and the Discourse of Resistance

Former Prime Minister Manuel Valls was not the first to criticize Michel Houellebecq's novel *Submission*, in which a Muslim president is elected in an imagined future France. Following trade practices, Houellebecq's publisher Flammarion distributed promotional copies of the novel to selected journalists before its official publication. On 2 January, Laurent Joffrin of the left-wing newspaper *Libération* said that *Submission* had an 'obvious political resonance' and that the date of its publication would be remembered as the day of the 'emergence – or return – of far-right ideas in literature'.<sup>4</sup> Four days later, socialist politician Alexis Corbière participated in a live debate with Sébastien Chenu of the right-wing Marine Blue Gathering coalition who, like Marine le Pen and other representatives of the National Front (NF), thought that Houellebecq's novel depicted a possible future.<sup>5</sup> In opposition to this standpoint, Corbière said that the novelist, though entitled to artistic freedom, presented a 'completely false idea' in saying that Sharia law could be introduced in France: 'The overwhelming majority of our Muslim fellow citizens are secularized people who respect the laws of the Republic. They are fed up with this discourse that claims that a Muslim equals a fundamentalist, as the book says. . . . It is a form of xenophobia'. Like Manuel Valls, Corbière more or less explicitly categorized the novel as xenophobic in that it adjoins a certain discourse established by others, i.e. the populist nationalist discourse of the National Front (NF). François Hollande, then President of the Republic, expressed himself more carefully. He urged the population not to be consumed by fear – this was before the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings – and to remember that the ideas of submission and invasion have a history.<sup>6</sup> Though not associating *Submission* with religious hatred and defamation, Hollande, by his use of the word 'fear', can be grouped with the opinion makers around Valls and Corbière who categorized the novel as xenophobic discourse. Indeed, when the word discourse (*discours*) is used in this context, it alludes to the Foucauldian hypothesis that linguistic practice is controlled and organized as an exercise of power.<sup>7</sup> To say that a novel adheres to a xenophobic discourse, then, is to suggest that it functions within a structure of shared values and objectives. Thus, it can be argued that the speaker thereby downplays both the novel's uniqueness and its semantic and pragmatic flexibility, i.e. its openness to different interpretations and its principally noncommittal aspect as an artwork. Arguably, to publicly categorize *Submission* as xenophobic discourse is in itself an exercise of power, the articulation of a 'discourse of resistance' to this novel and to its originator.

Edwy Plenel, cofounder of the online journal *Mediapart*, and former managing editor of *Le Monde*, adhered to this discourse of resistance. On 6 January, Plenel, who had recently written a book entitled *Pour les Musulmans* (For the Muslims), entered the studio of the national TV show *C à vous* refusing to discuss Houellebecq's novel – even though he had been invited to do just that. Instead of debating the novel, which he thought conveyed anti-Islamic myths, Plenel criticized the media for wasting so much airtime on Houellebecq, an 'Islamophobe'.<sup>8</sup> On a different show, radio and TV personality Ali Baddou announced that he felt insulted

by the novel because he is of Muslim culture: ‘When I opened this book I felt reduced to someone who longs for stay-home women, who would like to have four or five wives and to impose his laws and morals onto others. Is this how we should characterize Islam in France in 2015? Yes, I felt insulted’.<sup>9</sup> Though not explicitly categorizing the novel as part of a ‘discourse of fear’, Baddou participated in the discourse of resistance in that he categorized *Submission* as insulting to Muslims.

One essential characteristic of this critical stance is the firm and direct link established from the writer to the characters and ideas expressed in his or her fictional universe. To this group of critics, there is no separation between the writer and their fiction, and no discursive space for humour, irony or satire. They claim that the novel must be read literally. The fact that professional opinion makers draw such conclusions – or pretend to do so – is unsurprising since their designated task is to identify political signals and respond to them with effective rhetoric. Author and professor of literature Jérôme Meizoz published an article in *Les Temps Modernes* in which he drew similar conclusions.<sup>10</sup> In Jean-Paul Sartre’s old journal, Meizoz solemnly declared that after the publication of *Submission*, he could no longer have his students read Houellebecq’s works. Meizoz did not stop at the latest novel, but now censored *all* of Houellebecq’s works – texts that he had earlier found aesthetically interesting and pedagogically useful. Writing in the form of a public letter between intellectuals – alluding to the antagonistic correspondence published in the same journal between Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus in June of 1952 – Meizoz expressed a rhetoric of guilt by association in revealing, for instance, that police records indicated that the hard drive found at the apartment of the *Charlie Hebdo* killers contained several references to Houellebecq’s books. As for *Submission*, Meizoz found it lacked conviction and was full of clichés; he considered it a failure. Most of his objections were ideological in nature: Meizoz accused Houellebecq of reproducing opportunistic ideas and of being inspired by the phantasms of Alain Finkielkraut, Eric Zemmour, and Renaud Camus (Ref. 10, pp. 79–80). French writer Renaud Camus coined the expression ‘the great replacement’ (‘le grand remplacement’) in 2011 when he published a book with this title. Renaud Camus argued that because of immigration and birth rates, the occidental civilization of France would be replaced by an African civilization within a few generations. Social scientists have since refuted Renaud Camus’ controversial claim.<sup>11</sup> In fact, even leading representatives of the National Front, such as Marine Le Pen, have distanced themselves from it.<sup>12</sup> As for the philosopher Alain Finkielkraut, his 2013 book *L’identité malheureuse* similarly linked the weakening of French identity to extensive immigration and unsuccessful integration. Eric Zemmour is a conservative columnist and essayist who in *Le suicide français* regretted the ideological turn of French culture and politics after 1968 and the loss of traditional values. *Le suicide français* was published in the autumn of 2014 and became a bestseller in France. Meizoz was not alone in associating Houellebecq’s novel with Zemmour’s essay. Edwy Plenel also used Zemmour’s book as a reason not to discuss *Submission*, as he felt France had just endured ‘three months of Zemmourization’ and could not stand additional rhetoric of the sort.<sup>7</sup> Also, Tareq Oubrou, who heads

the mosque of Bordeaux, claimed that *Submission* appeared to be a softer version of *Le suicide français*.<sup>13</sup>

Meizoz's 'break-up letter' in *Les temps modernes* was dominated by political argumentation, references to the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings, and Houellebecq's possible opinions on societal matters. Apart from associating Houellebecq with terrorists and nationalists, Meizoz quoted Houellebecq admitting in an interview to being 'probably Islamophobic'.<sup>14</sup> The text published in *Les temps modernes* resulted from a personal awakening through which Meizoz came to terms with his position as a literary scholar. Since the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, he wrote, 'everything has changed' (Ref. 10, p. 83). Because a professor of literature can choose what to read and discuss, 'teaching and conducting research is primarily a *political gesture*', Meizoz declared. In the spirit of Sartre, and in opposition to the phlegmatic scholar character who narrates *Submission*, Meizoz decided he needed to act on this insight. He concluded: 'I do not wish to give place any more to your writings in my capacity as a scholar operating within the public-service sector' (Ref. 10, p. 83). In conclusion, not only opinion makers but also literary scholars have reacted politically to *Submission*. In a scholarly environment in which provocative literature is actively studied rather than passively endured, banning a Goncourt-winning writer's work on these grounds is remarkable. (Michel Houellebecq won the French novel prize Prix Goncourt in 2010, for *La carte et le territoire*.) Much literature is studied, not despite the challenging ideas it reproduces, but *because* of those ideas or, more precisely, because the rhetorical and poetic means by which they are reproduced constitute meaningful objects of study in that they expose literary discourse's complex reading modes and illustrate how literature can operate both politically and aesthetically without a clear distinction between them. As any recurring reader would perceive – and in this matter the critics' accounts, including Meizoz's, are more or less concordant – unconventional ideas are fundamental to Houellebecq's poetics, as are the modes of representing them through fictional characters and anonymous narrators. Nevertheless, to stop at these ideas, without discussing the modalities by which they are presented or the relationship between the fictional universe and the historical world, is to read fiction as nonfiction. Realist novels such as *Submission* – or any other Houellebecq novel for that matter – are partly nonfictional in that they refer to historical reality. A racist comment remains a racist comment even if it is pronounced by a fictional character: it is written by a real-world person with real-world readers in mind. What is remarkable about nonfictional readings of Houellebecq is that they disregard the literary context and modus of his work as well as the fact that its meaning – if there is to be any distinction at all between realism and journalism – is determined by the totality of the work in question and the polyphony of voices surrounding it, each expressing its particular moods and tonalities and conveying its particular background story, shortcomings, and ambitions.

It appears pertinent to reiterate that debates including similar positions and arguments have recurred throughout the history of criticism. Some of the most obvious examples in French literature are the trials and debates concerning the autonomy and responsibility of the Marquis de Sade (1740–1814), Charles Baudelaire

(1821–1867), Louis-Ferdinand Céline (1894–1961), and Jean Genet (1910–1986). In this essay, however, I will use the example of Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880) to illustrate the recurring dualist reception structure in which conflicting views of literature and morals are opposed. More precisely, I will refer to the case of Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary*, a work known to have shocked the public by leaving readers completely to their own moral devices. While earlier fiction writers would supplement morally challenging stories with didactic narrators, forewords, or epilogues articulating the appropriate conclusions to be drawn from the work and applied to the social world, Flaubert omitted this paratext and let his readers judge for themselves who was to blame and why. It appears pertinent to recap that the main character, Emma Bovary, before killing herself, is presented as a passionate reader of fiction. Her reading, it seems, reinforces her dreamy, ambiguous, and vulnerable character. Without explicit condemnation from any narrative authority, Emma Bovary joyfully commits adultery and egoistically indebts her family. In present times, a novel like *Madame Bovary* would hardly be considered a danger to society because the modern reader would understand that Emma is by no means presented as a positive example. In the France of 1856–1857 (the novel was published as a serial in 1856 before it was published as a single volume in 1857), however, society was not accustomed to non-didactic 'immoral' fictions, so Gustave Flaubert and his editor were brought to trial for outraging public morality and religion. Society thus accused Flaubert of promoting the decadence he himself had warned of by representing his protagonist as a negative example.

The trial of Flaubert displays interesting analogies with Houellebecq's reception over one and half centuries later. First, as Elisabeth Ladenson has demonstrated in *Dirt for Art's Sake: Books on Trial from Madame Bovary to Lolita*, the moral judgments targeting Flaubert depended on the expected demography of his readership (Ref. 15, pp. 62–63). While, in Flaubert's case, patriarchal society was out to defend female readers from being corrupted by *Madame Bovary*, Meizoz aspired to protect students from being affected by *Submission*'s potentially demoralizing influence. Meizoz's line of argumentation was remarkably similar to that of Flaubert's prosecutor, namely, that 'the officially designated function of literature was to uplift the good spirit by good example' (Ref. 15, p. 26). Bad morals in literature, according to the protagonists of the discourse of resistance, signify bad morals in the writer and potentially create bad morals in the public. Similarly, Kajsa Ekis Ekman alerted the public to the dubious representation, in *Submission*, of 'just another offended white male who becomes a racist when strangers come between him and his desired sex objects', as if the very act of representing racism were despicable.<sup>16</sup> This gatekeeping criticism was ideological insofar as 'the practico-social function [was] more important than the theoretical function (function as knowledge)'.<sup>17</sup> These critics, specialized in literature, refrained from exploring the aesthetics or philosophy of the work. *Submission* was not used, within the discourse of resistance, as a possible carrier of knowledge. Instead, these literary critics openly used their platforms to shape opinion in line with the journalists and politicians quoted earlier who classified Houellebecq as racist, xenophobic or Islamophobic. Houellebecq's novel, within

the discourse of resistance, functioned as a means to convey political messages and build an antiracist ethos.

In sum, it seems reasonable to suggest that the analogies between this discourse of resistance and the argumentation of Flaubert's prosecutor stem from the fact that both Houellebecq and Flaubert challenge conventional thinking through realist fiction that includes negative examples without overt moral orientation, evoking similarly oriented responses. In both gatekeeping discourses, practice–social functions took the upper hand over philosophy and knowledge. While the protagonists of the discourse of resistance, acting on personal convictions of ideological emergency, felt obliged to disregard philosophy and aesthetics, Flaubert's prosecutor similarly had a particular goal in mind: to have the novelist convicted. It appears unsurprising that, in legal discourse, Flaubert's prosecutor, Ernest Pinard, claimed that immoral fictions reveal bad morals in the writer. As Dominick LaCapra has pointed out in *Madame Bovary on Trial*, 'Pinard's understanding of the intention or "thought" of the author is in keeping with his focus upon the text of the novel. For him, intention is fully "embodied": it is what the author means to say in the text' (Ref. 18, pp. 34–35). This statement was echoed 160 years later when Houellebecq's critics fleetingly associated the bad morals of *Submission* with its writer's character and intentions.

If Flaubert's prosecutor spoke like Houellebecq's antagonists, his defence lawyer largely mirrored the representatives of the discourse of aesthetics in that he, as LaCapra has underscored, understood intention 'in a broader and less discriminating way' (Ref. 18, p. 35). Because of the fictional contract, intention is problematic in literary discourse. It is more productive to reflect on the principal *relevance* of the writer's intentions and ideological standpoints. Supposing, for the sake of argument, that Michel Houellebecq is Islamophobic, does this automatically mean that his novels threaten Islam or Western humanism? It is impossible to exclude the possibility that some critics did believe so, especially if one considers that the book was published on the day of the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings when Islamophobia seemed a plausible reaction. The fact that parts of the discourse of resistance were formed the day before (Plenel) and many months after the attack (Ekman) does not counter this argument, because terrorism has repeatedly been mentioned in debates on migration and Islam since the attacks of 11 September 2001. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to suggest that the discourse of resistance can also be understood in light of the impact of debates on Houellebecq, in general, and the political enunciation scene his novel set up.

In conclusion, the prosecutor's blaming of Flaubert for his 'lack of heroic characters, banality of subject, and absence of identifiable moral viewpoint' (Ref. 15, p. 24) appears a model for the gatekeeping criticism that met Michel Houellebecq in more recent times. Flaubert's prosecutor and Houellebecq's denigrators seemed to share the view that literature should serve a morally uplifting purpose – or at least uphold the status quo (Ref. 15, p. 21). While in Flaubert's society, as Ladenson has remarked, the status quo was to be understood from the perspective of Christian morality, the status quo means something slightly different in Houellebecq's time. Although Western European morals are still based on Christian ethics, the values and policies protected

by the discourse of resistance differ in that they serve a society in transformation: Houellebecq's critics were defending a status quo of ongoing migration from Muslim countries and of ongoing development towards a multicultural society. As for Valls and many of the other politicians who expressed themselves after Charlie Hebdo, 'fear' was a frequently used and emphasized word. The status quo they were defending was a society without fear, and they alerted the public to the danger that Houellebecq's novel would frighten Europeans. Houellebecq responded to this critique on French radio by saying it was not his book that was frightening the public, as people were already uneasy before he wrote it, despising journalists, politicians and judges.<sup>19</sup>

### Liberal Reception

The history of criticism has been marked by inconclusive debates over who is to be considered the main protagonist of literary communication: the writer, the reader, or some other agent or combination of agents. How literary works are received depends on contemporary aesthetic, political and cultural currents, and on contemporary literary canons. Hans Robert Jauss named this set of criteria the 'horizon of expectations' and designated the reader the main protagonist of literary communication.<sup>20</sup> Wolfgang Iser provided a more dehistoricized model of the reading process, arguing that each literary text creates an 'implied reader' by means of its 'network of response-inviting structures'.<sup>21</sup> Michael Riffaterre described encounters between readers and a literary text as multiple performances of a partiture that never sound exactly the same.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Hans Georg Gadamer viewed aesthetic reception as a kind of game or dance, adding that in the course of reading it does not matter who 'leads' since the reader/dancer is absorbed by the activity.<sup>23</sup> The question of subjectivity is crucial when discussing literature and values. George Poulet described the reading phenomenon as a process of 'making way not only for a stream of words, images, and foreign ideas, but also for the very principle from which these ideas emanate, the principle that houses them'.<sup>24</sup> To perform a literary reading, then, is to make way for a provisional subjectivity that is simultaneously foreign and owned, a subjectivity that results from a process of decoding, valuing and living the text, and placing the work in a personal and social context. Ideas expressed in a novel are thereby considered from a more internal perspective than are ideas encountered in social discourse. The process of reading novels allows us to consider foreign ideas and values against the familiar backdrop of our own identity. When reading ideologically challenging writers, as LaCapra argues with *Madame Bovary* in mind,

the standard relation between text and context tends to be reversed; it is no longer the context that provides determinate boundaries for interpreting and evaluating the text. Rather the text comes to challenge its context and the adequacy of its framing or boundary-marking devices, for it questions the viability of criteria of understanding and evaluation as they function within that context or others sufficiently analogous to it. (Ref. 18, p. 31)



Houellebecq's and Flaubert's stories potentially challenge our faculties of moral and ideological judgement, not by explicitly reinterpreting social references and historical context, as journalists and politicians do, but by letting the characters' inner and outer behaviour incite us to see new meanings in our world and try out new interpretative models. The fact that reading is typically a solitary process does not mean that readers are completely isolated but that they remain persons subject to social control. Self-forgetting though they may be, fiction readers do not cease to be morally conscious and socially responsible human beings. Martine Burgos pertinently reiterated that reading clubs and social life in general exercise a certain control over fiction readers, especially when the material is ethically challenging.<sup>25</sup> Along similar lines, Martha Nussbaum<sup>26</sup> asserts that fiction reading nourishes

fantasies that may involve the dehumanization of others. Ethical assessment of the novels themselves, in conversation with other readers and with the arguments of moral and political theory, is therefore necessary if the contribution of novels is to be politically fruitful. We are seeking, overall, the best fit between our considered moral and political judgments and the insights offered by our reading. Reading can lead us to alter some of our standing judgments, but it is also the case that these judgments can cause us to reject some experiences of reading as deforming or pernicious.

To appreciate and recommend ideologically challenging literature such as *Submission*, it appears necessary to trust the reader's capacity to judge the work – not only from a purely aesthetic point of view but also from an ethical perspective. Moreover, liberal readers tend to downplay the importance of the writer's personal opinions, instead emphasizing the individual freedom and responsibility of the reader. In opposition to those who claimed that *Submission* exposed Houellebecq's personal Islamophobia, Claire Devarrieux of *Libération* maintained that the writer's inner thoughts on a future Muslim president of France remained indeterminable.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, *Libération* is a left-wing paper, just like the Swedish *Aftonbladet* whose critic Åsa Linderborg also took a liberal stance and defended Houellebecq's work, calling it a fantastic, provocative, entertaining and demanding novel of ideas.<sup>28</sup> The representatives of the liberal reading mode noted the novel's semantic and ideological flexibility, qualities seen as valuable rather than threatening. Liberal readers are inclined to attach labels such as 'satire' to provocative texts, emphasizing the possibility of complex and veiled message structures. Besides Devarrieux and Linderborg, a liberal reading was carried out by Jean d'Ormesson of the French Academy who characterized *Submission* as an 'amusing and tragic satire in the style of Jonathan Swift'.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard, reviewing *Submission* for *The New York Times*, called it 'strongly satirical'. Distancing himself from those who claimed that the novel mocked the underprivileged, Knausgaard went on to explain that 'its satire is directed toward the intellectual classes, among whom no trace is found of idealism, and not a shadow of will to defend any set of values'.<sup>30</sup> The novel, according to this reading, deals with contemporary society's ideological confusion without seriously presenting any alternatives. However, it calls to the reader's attention that ideological

and political vacuums tend to be filled at some point. Knausgaard is one of many critics who have praised Houellebecq's clear vision of today's Western society, although *Submission*'s narrator refrains from looking into his own motives and from answering the questions raised:

The disillusioned gaze sees through everything, sees all the lies and the pretences we concoct to give life meaning, the only thing it doesn't see is its own origin, its own driving force. But what does that matter as long as it creates great literature, quivering with ambivalence, full of longing for meaning, which, if none is found, it creates itself?<sup>30</sup>

Much like Flaubert's lawyer, Knausgaard praises ambivalence, revealing a liberal reading mode. Along similar lines, Marcela Iacub stated that Houellebecq's political opinions are irrelevant to the readers of his fiction:

As if they had the slightest importance when we judge a novelist. It's like producing a TV program where politicians like François Hollande express their opinions on sport or gastronomy. Indeed, what do we care if Houellebecq is far-right, far-left, anarchist, racist, or anti-racist? Why would his political opinions be more important than anyone else's?<sup>31</sup>

In response to Iacub's last question one could argue that the discourse of resistance, by alerting the public to the dangers of Houellebecq's book, elevates its importance and implies that Houellebecq's views are more important and powerful than the reader's own opinions or than reigning contemporary norms. Iacub's mocking tone reveals that her position took shape in opposition to another position. Although liberal readings stand on different reception-theoretical bases than do more openly political readings, they should not be viewed as principally apolitical. Iacub's critique is political in that it expresses resistance to resistance.

In addition to the above-mentioned representatives of the liberal reading mode, the nineteenth-century literature scholar and Houellebecq specialist Agathe Novak-Lechevalier stressed the aesthetic qualities and semantic heterogeneity of *Submission*. In a review published in *Libération*, Novak-Lechevalier claimed that the title of the novel itself inspires a reading mode that actualizes parallel interpretations. The word 'submission', asserted Novak-Lechevalier, is not only a translation of 'Islam', but the term is also heavily charged with erotic and political connotations, as is Houellebecq's novel as a whole.<sup>32</sup>

Italian critic Antonio Scurati adheres to the liberal reading mode in considering the unorthodox moral stance of *Submission* not as threatening contemporary humanist doxa but as permitting one to see the world from a new perspective. Houellebecq's nihilism, Scurati remarks, is not some puerile depreciation of all values; rather, it is a way of handling the risk and difficulty of making sense of the chaotic post-religious world in which not much can be taken for granted.<sup>33</sup> In addition, Adrian-George Matus claimed that *Submission* is 'a highly aesthetic novel' that 'reflects a collective anxiety of the French contemporary society: the fear of radical otherness'.<sup>34</sup> This fear, according to this line of criticism, should not be silenced or ignored but should

be overt, aestheticized, analysed and discussed. Liberal readers, then, should not refrain from political reasoning and social commitment, but should instigate political discussions without condemning the work or its writer.

French parliamentary records reveal that *Submission* has been a topic within the legislative process on several occasions. Regarding the matter of opposing reading modes, it is interesting to note that republican deputy Annie Genevard, in September 2015, quoted Manuel Valls' reproachful speech of 7 January as an example of hypocrisy regarding artistic freedom: 'When defending artistic freedom, we had better not become the biter bit. In this respect, I call to your attention the prime minister's reaction when Michel Houellebecq's *Submission* was published'. According to the official records of the National Assembly, several members of the left-wing parliamentary group asked, 'So what?', whereupon Genevard explained that Valls' comment questioned the value of Houellebecq's work. The left-wing group protested anew and Genevard silenced them by quoting Valls' speech word for word, at which the republican group applauded, according to the parliamentary archives.<sup>35</sup> It is not surprising to see the left-wing parliamentarians defend the prime minister of Hollande's government; nonetheless, it is interesting to see the debate about *Submission* spreading through political institutions.

To sum up, in opposition to those who claimed that Michel Houellebecq's *Submission* is Islamophobic and a danger to society, several critics defended a more liberal reading mode, noting that depicting a certain society does not necessarily mean promoting or contesting it. These critics reused Flaubert's defence lawyer's argument that the writer 'portrays vice to promote virtue' (Ref. 15, p. 26). The demarcation line between the two groups of critics does not primarily concern societal values, i.e. views of Islam or increasing immigration; rather, what distinguishes them is primarily their posited conception of literary discourse and of the reader's capacity to interpret and judge. That said, there is no effective platform in the field of literary criticism for xenophobic discourse, so it is possible that some of the liberal critics were promoting Houellebecq for political reasons. If one thinks that *Submission* promotes racism, or some other extremist value cluster that one endorses, elevating the book and its author would be a more effective method than would speaking up for tabooed values. Since intention and ideology are largely concealed by the conditions of literary discourse – i.e. the fictional contract, primacy of form, principal semantic ambiguity, etc. – reception texts (including literary criticism, political speeches, and legal argumentation) are more fruitful objects of study than are literary texts whose obliqueness intrigues us and questions us without providing definite answers. The problem has been more clearly expressed by LaCapra as:

the extent to which the novel conforms to (or is symptomatic of) its context, is critical of it, and initiates processes that cannot be contained within the categories of the symptomatic and the critical but are nonetheless bound up with sociocultural transformation in its most comprehensive sense. (Ref. 18, p. 19)

What makes realist fiction interesting from a political perspective, then, is that it can process and project sociologically and historically relevant material without controlling its effects and without permitting outside control. This process, as LaCapra has pointed out, is neither symptomatic nor critical but has sociocultural agency all the same. To an opinion maker, uncontrollability is disturbing, a problem to resolve. On the other hand, ideological ambiguity also permits the opinion maker to suggest readings that fit his or her political agenda. What about critics who prioritize aesthetic experience and ignore personal and societal interests, ecstatically delivering themselves to the artwork in the spirit of Hans Georg Gadamer? Do such critics have a place in Houellebecq's reception structure?<sup>36</sup> Each reader of Houellebecq's works is subjected to this conflict of interest: one must consciously or unconsciously choose to what extent historical, social, and political considerations are to be integrated in the decoding of the text. The debate on *Submission* is largely structured around this question: like the Bovary trial, it gives voice to two opposing attitudes towards literature. These attitudes have political meaning and theoretically coincide with political ideology insofar as liberal values such as individual freedom and responsibility privilege literature that alerts the public to institutional oppression and group pressure. In practice, however, liberal readers do not necessarily support liberal values, as the examples of Åsa Linderborg and Claire Devarrieux illustrate.<sup>37</sup> A liberal reading mode can be used to promote any ideology, although liberal criticism typically does not draw definite political conclusions because it maintains literature's discursive autonomy.

### Houellebecq's Standpoint

Since the formalist paradigm of the mid-twentieth century and Roland Barthes' famous declaration of 'the death of the author',<sup>38</sup> literary criticism has regained interest in the author's position, intentions and morals. Rather than re-initiating older biographical interpretation models that deceptively explained fictional works on the basis of the writer's personal life, recent criticism deduces a more complex relationship between life and work, emphasizing the aesthetic values of autobiographical reference and so-called 'autofictional' play in which the writer stages himself as both a narrated and tangible protagonist. As Liesbeth Korthals Altes has emphasized, Michel Houellebecq is often viewed as a representative of this trend.<sup>39</sup> Raphaël Baroni has pointed out that the most provocative novels are also novels that induce readers to reflect on the opinions of the writer.<sup>40</sup> The logic of the media supports this quest for authors' inner motives, serving writers who play public roles around and through their books, as Philippe Lejeune has demonstrated.<sup>41</sup> Following this media logic, the questions of news anchor David Pujadas to Houellebecq on national TV the day before *Submission*'s publication focused on the writer's own views on Islam and contemporary French politics. Michel Houellebecq categorically dodged such questions, on both TV and radio. On the leading French morning radio show '7 à 9', Houellebecq claimed to refrain from voting and to have little respect for

French politicians. 'They really are not up to the task', he said to radio producer Patrick Cohen several hours before the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings – in other words, the day before Valls' condemnatory speech.<sup>42</sup> When it comes to representing politicians in his novels, Houellebecq practices no discrimination, mocking both left-wing and right-wing politicians. In *The Elementary Particles*, for instance, Houellebecq's character Bruno says he 'could have joined the National Front but what's the point of eating sauerkraut with idiots? Anyhow, right-wing women don't exist and they fuck paratroopers' (Ref. 43, p. 196). In *Submission*, the main character distances himself from the right-wing character Godefroy Lempereur: 'I nearly asked Lempereur "Are you rather Catholic, fascist, or a mixture of the two?" before getting a hold on myself. I clearly had lost contact with the right-wing intellectuals, I didn't know how to deal with them at all'.<sup>44</sup>

Michel Houellebecq's disturbing statement on Islam as the stupidest religion, for which he was sued (and acquitted) in 2002, understandably leads many readers towards an Islamophobic interpretation of *Submission*. In addition, the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights in France listed Michel Houellebecq's third novel *Platform* as a text that expressed hostility towards Islam.<sup>45</sup> Salman Rushdie, in this era, defended Michel Houellebecq's right to create immoral characters, and declared in *The Guardian* that 'within a literary text, it must be possible to create characters of every sort. If novelists can't depict Nazis or bigots without being accused of being Nazis or bigots, then they can't do their work properly'.<sup>46</sup> Since then, Houellebecq has distanced himself from the statement, claiming that additional readings of the Qur'an have made him understand Islam better: 'All things considered there is room for negotiation. You need a serious dose of dishonesty to interpret the Qur'an like the Jihadists do', Houellebecq said in January 2015.<sup>47</sup> All the same, he found himself obliged to explain in interviews that *Submission* is not Islamophobic.<sup>48</sup> It appears as though the 2002 provocation along with diverse negative statements on Islam in *Platform* have created what Jon Helt Haarder has named a 'biographic irreversibility', that is, a piece of biographical information regarding the author that is stuck in readers' heads and cannot be separated from the interpretation of his works.<sup>49</sup> In light of his earlier statement, seeing Houellebecq create a scenario in which a Muslim president is elected in France naturally raises one's suspicions. On 6 September 2015, Houellebecq gave support to this legend in an interview with *The Guardian* saying that he is probably Islamophobic. 'It's not my role to be responsible', he added. 'I don't feel responsible. [...] The role of a novel is to entertain readers, and fear is one of the most entertaining things there is.' Furthermore, the author added to his earlier positive statement on the Qur'an that 'objectively, there's just as little chance of Muslims reading the Qur'an as Christians reading the Bible. So what really counts in both cases is who is the clergy, or middleman, or interpreter. And in the case of Islam, that's very open'.<sup>50</sup> During the same period, Houellebecq admitted on French TV that he had exploited a fear that exists in French society, an anxiety that he believes has to do with secularization.<sup>50</sup> Houellebecq here picks up a trope from *The Elementary Particles* in which religion is compared to the hot water of a radiator

system, and the hero reflects on how long a society can function without religion (Ref. 42, p. 162). After the technical solution, i.e. cloning, to the problems of contemporary secular Western society (e.g. solitude, nihilism and depression) that he presented in *The Elementary Particles*, the Houellebecq of *Submission* tried Islam as a solution to these problems. The fact that the author now admitted to being ‘probably Islamophobic’ and to exploiting people’s fear of Islam can be understood as a way of adding fuel to the debate and staying relevant during the fall of 2015 when *Submission* was released in Great Britain and in the USA. Nevertheless, the writer categorically refuted the political effects of literature: ‘I don’t know any examples of a novel that changed the course of history. Other things have changed the course of history – essays, the *Communist Manifesto*, things like that – but not novels’, Houellebecq said when news presenter David Pujadas interviewed him on the day before *Submission*’s publication.<sup>51</sup> He developed this thought in *Le Figaro* later that year when the journal’s reporter compared him to Alain Finkielkraut, Eric Zemmour, Pascal Bruckner and Michel Onfray.

The people you quoted are all intellectuals, philosophers who write essays and not fiction, while I am into literature. Let’s say that what I do is of a different order. I mean no disrespect, I am just conscious that our works are very different. Our works play in independent zones of the brain. I have understood that a novelist can never have political influence’.<sup>52</sup>

Indeed, fiction and nonfiction are different matters. Nonetheless social psychological research suggests that reading a work of fiction can change the readers’ voting habits, which indicates a kind of political influence.<sup>53</sup> Although changing a vote is a different matter, the possibility can hardly be excluded. While the British Parliament has only discussed Michel Houellebecq’s statements outside of his books,<sup>54</sup> members of its French equivalent, the National Assembly, have cited Houellebecq’s fictional works – more precisely the novel *Submission* – in political argumentation concerning various law propositions. For example, in a debate on a possible reorganization of the territorial structure of France, republican parliamentarian Nicolas Dhuicq cited *Submission* in his argumentation, claiming that Michel Houellebecq was ‘perfectly right in his analyses’.<sup>55</sup> The novel was also invoked in a proposition to change the law on religious freedom, a proposal in which Houellebecq’s character Mohammed Ben Abbes was cited as exemplifying ‘falsely sympathetic’ images of political Islam.<sup>56</sup> On top of this, both *Submission* and other Houellebecq texts have been referred to in numerous debates among politicians in the media, some of which are quoted above. It appears reasonable to conclude that Houellebecq’s statement that a novelist can never have political influence is rather disingenuous.

The notion of ideological fiction is far from controversial. In *Authoritarian Fictions*, Susan Suleiman defined the *roman à these* as a realist novel that comes across as a pedagogical vehicle aspiring to demonstrate the truth of a political, philosophical, scientific, or religious doctrine.<sup>57</sup> Michel Houellebecq has presented many lessons in his novels and his narrators have engaged in dialogues with philosophers such as Comte, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. As online magazine *Slate* revealed,

Houellebecq has quoted scientific texts and copied segments of information from Wikipedia.<sup>58</sup> However, nobody has yet successfully argued that Houellebecq has written any novel specifically to demonstrate the truth of a *political* doctrine. I concur with Bruno Viard that Houellebecq is not a politically driven writer.<sup>59</sup> He merely reflects on the conditions of humanity and on what makes us lean towards different values, positions and votes. More than anything else, as Scurati has remarked, Houellebecq's project is intended to expose serious problems that have been ignored or avoided by politicians and journalists, but without the author taking a stand himself. Houellebecq's refusal to assume political positions has interchangeably been interpreted as a satirical approach, as expressing nihilism, or even as silent approval of deeply immoral behaviours such as racism and misogyny. Houellebecq's detached posture may also be viewed from an aesthetic point of view. In a letter to the philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy, Michel Houellebecq has described his adult life and writings as an aesthetic reproduction of his father's characteristic gesture of retreat.<sup>60</sup> He has expressed this aesthetic stance in one of his poems:

We must develop an attitude of non-resistance to the world / The negative is negative,  
 / The positive is positive, / Things exist. / They appear, they transform, / And then  
 they simply cease to exist: / The world outside, it seems, is given. / The perceiving  
 being resembles an alga, repugnant and soft, / Fundamentally feminine / And that  
 is what we have to reach / If we want to talk about the world, Just talk about the  
 world. / We must not look like him who tries to bend the world according to his  
 desires [...] We must not fight, / We are in the eternal position of the defeated.<sup>61</sup>

Reducing Houellebecq's literary project to an aestheticized gesture of withdrawal is an oversimplification, but the stance projected in the above poem and in his letter to Lévy accords with the attitude displayed in interviews on political matters. Although no consistent ideological superstructure is evident, Houellebecq's novels are full of referential anchorage and political content – not only in *Submission* but also in *Whatever*, where economic liberalism is critiqued, and in *The Elementary Particles*, where the political groupings formed in May 1968 are soundly thrashed. It seems reasonable to suggest that this referential play, along with Houellebecq's position as a publicly known reference himself, is one reason why many politicians use *Submission* in their practice.

### Conclusion

The global reception of *Submission* can be seen as alternating between politics and aesthetics, combining the practico-social and knowledge-seeking functions, resistance to old ideas, and the creation of new ideas. Judging from the initial responses in France, representatives of the political centre-left displayed a more negative attitude towards *Submission* and Houellebecq, while the republican right was neutral and the nationalist right was positive. This pattern emerged even though none of Houellebecq's novels defends a right-wing position, let alone a nationalist right-wing position. If anything, it can be noted that all of his novels present negative images of

liberal capitalism. Interestingly, most of the opinion makers who used ethical arguments and took it upon themselves to warn the public about Houellebecq's harmful and compromising nature were associated with the political left and centre-left. As for literary criticism, there were no consistent differences between left-wing and right-wing papers.

To understand the structure of the reception corpus, then, it appears necessary to use a different benchmark from the traditional left–right continuum, i.e. economic socialism plus cultural liberalism contra economic liberalism plus cultural conservatism. In this article, I have proposed considering the critics' explicit and implicit views on how much trust should be placed in readers' moral faculties. While the critics and opinion makers I catalogued within the 'discourse of resistance' tended to warn the public and use the logic of guilt by association to discredit the writer, liberal readers instead viewed the writer as someone highlighting social problems and asking questions without defending any particular position. The latter group put more trust in the reader's aptitude to consider societal questions from an ethical perspective. According to this line of thought, misogynist and racist characters presumably evoke reader protests rather than functioning as role models. Houellebecq's admitted exploitation of the public fear of Islam can then be interpreted as a call to deal with this fear and revise existing societal structures.

The opposing group of readers considered the ideas expressed in *Submission* to be representative of the writer's mind, or of some power structure he unconsciously obeyed. This interpretative model generally leads to the disapproval of writers whose viewpoints are perceived as obsolete and unfair. The critics who applied this method when reading Houellebecq's novel assumed the duty of publicly fighting the ideological material they believed the novel transmitted. Since Houellebecq's novel, like most other novels, contains a heterogeneous and modally filtered set of ideas, beliefs and positions, none of which can undoubtedly be assumed to represent the novel as a whole, let alone its writer, these gatekeeping critics had to spend a lot of time, energy, and words arguing that an ideological synthesis was even possible. Once this task was completed, i.e. once the writer had been associated with commonly despised values such as racism and misogyny, there was no need – or place – to criticize the novel as artwork. In this politically oriented criticism, ethics had primacy over aesthetics. The main assumption of the gatekeeping discourse was that audiences cannot be trusted to find their way using their personal moral compasses; rather, the critics must provide ethical interpretations in order to minimize political damage.

The conflict between these two positions is not a new one, being at least as old as Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, published in 1856–1857. Before Flaubert, immoral behaviour was normally explained or put into perspective by an omnipotent narrator or fictional prefacer. Both Houellebecq's and Flaubert's stories challenge the readers' faculties of moral and ideological judgement, not by reinterpreting social references and historical context the way essayists, journalists and politicians do, but by letting the characters' behaviour show that the contours of the social world may need to be redefined. The novels provide neither explanation nor guidance; rather,



the readers are challenged to draw their own conclusions and possibly reconsider naturalized assumptions.

Houellebecq's project, then, is about pointing to aspects of social reality that are easily disregarded, small actualities that 'pass under the radar' because they are alien to the enlightened, humanist, and democratic self-image of the Western world. Houellebecq clearly exaggerates their presence, ugliness and acuteness. The scenario of Islamism gaining power within a decade is completely unrealistic, and the author has admitted that he concentrated the timeframe for dramaturgic reasons. The fact that Houellebecq's representation is simultaneously relevant and absurd indicates that it does not stop at depicting provocative details but also questions how we structure the world. Social categories and criteria of inclusion are tested from rational, functional, sexual and emotional perspectives. Clichés and automatized thinking are identified; politically correct discourses are dismantled by a provocative voice that phlegmatically uncovers the myths that build contemporary societies. Houellebecq thus practices subversion through immersion – a highly effective technique. As his wide international influence indicates, the gatekeeping campaign launched by the prime minister proved futile. Clearly, society still holds a place for aesthetic imagination and denaturalizing suggestion, one and a half centuries after Flaubert was acquitted.

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