

Afterword to Transgression: Theses on Houellebecq

Vincent Lloyd

Abstract: Michel Houellebecq is often associated with right-wing populism, but his writing and thought resist this categorization. By examining major themes in Houellebecq's work, including religion, love, eroticism, and liberation, we are able to appreciate the critical intervention he makes against both simplistic liberalism and populisms. A generation after Michel Foucault lauded Georges Bataille's transgressions, Houellebecq asks what it means to write, think, and organize when transgression is powerless.

Keywords: Michel Houellebecq, Georges Bataille, religion, desire, eroticism, loneliness

Michel Houellebecq is among but not of the nouveau right.

Houellebecq is not a conservative. He is not a populist. He is not a libertarian. He is not an influencer. But it is reasonable to associate Houellebecq with each of these labels. He professes – in his own voice and in the voice of his characters – to have sympathy with workers, nationalists, and advocates of free expression. He is a celebrity, even if he does not exactly have disciples. It is tempting to explain: Houellebecq is an artist, not an ideologue. He expresses and drives forward popular sentiment in a way that stands at a distance from that sentiment. This is correct, but too easy. It is true that artists stand perpendicular to, not separate from, the political currents of the day – and it is true that artists always stumble, sometimes grotesquely, when speaking of the political significance of their work. But the nouveau right has a distinct ability to pull toward it those adjacent to it. This combines with its disinterest in art to make Houellebecq's position surprising and intriguing. Thus, Houellebecq's ability to remain ambivalently positioned with respect to the nouveau right is an invitation to think more carefully about both Houellebecq and the contemporary political formations he and his work traverse.

Transgression is again the currency of the day.

The charisma of the right-wing populist, what distinguishes them from the left-wing populist (if we are to use these crude abbreviations), is that their distinctive gift, their magnetism, is connected to their power to transgress. In their fabulations, society was once healthy, then it embraced the excesses of the 60s, which were really new forms of dogma that went under the label of freedom, and the task of the thoughtful, freedom-loving patriot today is to pierce those dogmas, bringing us back to the greatness that came before. The task of the political leader is to model what it looks like to pierce dogmas: with cutting words, mockery, irony, and with select symbols of the past. The nouveau right takes pleasure in transgressing the calcified "liberation" of elites, enjoying the contradictions it exposes and so gathering power itself. Houellebecq would seem to embrace

such fabulations and such performance, but without interest in power. If anything, the Houellebecqian move results in destitution. His superb skill at piercing the contradictions of liberalism unleashes a kind of cold pleasure, not the hot pleasure (and eros) unleashed and channeled by the nouveau right. For Houellebecq's challenge to the promise of liberation is not fueled by the pleasure of transgression but by the exhaustion of transgression. For him, it is necessary to toy with the limits and paradoxes of our purported freedoms, but the symbols of the past are just as ridiculous as the certainties of the present. Whatever pleasure and power might be promised by transgression has nowhere to go; transgression is flaccid.

Like Georges Bataille, Houellebecq finds critical power in the erotic.

The nouveau right is, like any movement, powered by organizing desire as a means to organize people. Men aspire to be men, strong and virile; women to be women, strong and tender. The powers that be, abbreviated as "liberalism," are blocking these aspirations, making men soft and weak, making women choose between strength and tenderness. The appeal to sexual energy has even more force than the appeal to nostalgia, which is ultimately subordinate to it – a truism across the history of the right, manifesting differently in each age. This is why Bataille was so often confused with the fascists who were his contemporaries: for him, unleashing the materiality of desire, the body parts yearning and transgressing and desecrating, held the power to reorganize society and, subordinately, history. But Bataille portrayed these forces as essentially destructive, unmaking subjectivity and unmaking sovereignty. The erotic pull of fascism was – is – constructive, building up the social body through the libidinal pull to submit to and pleasure in a greater whole. On this point, Houellebecq stands with Bataille against the fascists. Something like the erotic is, notoriously, all over Houellebecq's prose. As for Bataille, it is the materiality of the erotic that suffuses Houellebecq's prose, quasi-anatomical descriptions of body parts and their configurations. The materiality of the erotic, in Houellebecq, is a reduction of the erotic to the material. However, just as for Bataille, encountering the erotic in Houellebecq's novels results in demystification, pulling away the illusions that make plausible a social whole.

Unlike Bataille, Houellebecq does not paint the erotic as a path beyond the social.

Bataille is, as he advertises, a theologian turned upside down. He turns away from the wisdom of the world in favor of something better, truer, and more beautiful, but the path he takes is descent rather than ascent, transgression rather than purity. (The nouveau right is neither theological nor atheological; it is essentially selfish, mobilizing pieces of the theological imagination to tell a story about satisfying the desires of

the self.) Houellebecq writes in an age during which the erotic has been evacuated of feeling even as its presence has proliferated. Dating apps, sex clubs, tourism, art projects: they all spread out the erotic and, in so doing, subject it to the logic of the social world at large. What was once a promise of transcendence has become calculated, one set of options and accessories among the many that the world presents to us. Consequently, the inequalities of society are reproduced in the domain of the erotic. The distribution of sexual pleasure is like the distribution of money: there are some with much and some with little, and there is a deep arbitrariness about it all. The materiality of the erotic flows freely across lines of racial and national borders, but not without replicating the asymmetries that those borders mark in all domains. In short, what was a peculiar path to liberation for Bataille has become, a half-century later, just one more tightening of capitalism's constriction on our forms of life.

Houellebecq cares deeply about the '60s, much more than the nouveau right.

It is, in fact, liberals who are the most invested in the legacy of the '60s, along with the rapidly diminishing number of traditional conservatives. Barack Obama, Tony Blair, and many of the other liberals who rose to prominence around the turn of the millennium present themselves as rightly navigating the excesses of the '60s. As Obama puts it explicitly in one of his books: the '60s was a divisive time because it was the time of rebellion against an overbearing father. Some children imitate the father, others reject everything he says. By now, we have grown up: we can take what we need from the past and leave behind what we do not. We can come into our own. We can embrace the new freedoms to express ourselves, to live the way we like, without living in communes and burning bras, and draft cards. What Houellebecq and many others point out is that what results from this dynamic is not a well-adjusted adult, like the '50s but better. To the contrary, what results is a new kind of human being, one who has internalized the logic of the free market, the logic of the corporation: the freedom to pursue more for oneself in a context of scarcity. The nihilism that is so often attributed to Houellebecq is really an indicator of the limits of our imagination, for Houellebecq does reject neoliberal man, '50s man, and the two opposing postures of the '60s – but those four stances need not form the limits of how we can see the world. On this point, yet again, Houellebecq differs from the nouveau right, for that movement sees only continuity between the '60s and today. It sees the subject of capitalist desire as the savior of both. For the nouveau right, the '60s is the '80s. Reagan and Thatcher were the true models of freedom – and of the excesses of freedom. Now that we have matured, we can see that we need not embrace or reject outright free markets; indeed, the free market may be at odds with the subject of capitalist desire. With that subject, now mature, always front and center,

the nouveau right purports to shape markets in the interest of the worker-capitalist, the farmer-capitalist, the homemaker-capitalist – disavowing its actual beneficiaries, the rich.

**Religion alone promises happiness, for Houellebecq,
and it is an empty promise.**

For Bataille, the erotic and religion were inextricable. Bataille did not reject religion, he offered better religion, which he accessed by attending to the way religion actually unleashes rather than regulates the power of the erotic. For Houellebecq, at the turn of the millennium, the erotic has been fully captured, but religion is still a source of energy. When secularism and capitalism march in lockstep, religion is the only source of genuine transgression. This is an idea that Houellebecq toys with in the several forms religion takes today, or in their ideal types: Catholicism, Islam, and New Age. Each promises happiness, each disappoints – each in a different way. Each titillates. The power and possibility of religion is not so much in its embrace of tradition or even in its sociality, but rather in its promise, and in how that promise is felt. Capitalism promises pleasure; religion promises happiness. Which is really to say: religion, at its best, cleaves pleasure from happiness. Religion (especially Islam, in Houellebecq's view, but ultimately all religion) fails in this task, but the task remains essential. Bataille has no resources for distinguishing pleasure from happiness: if there is a difference, in his account, it is quantitative rather than qualitative. The nouveau right similarly fails to make this distinction: religion sanctions and organizes pleasure, and the result is, supposedly, happiness. It is up to you to choose which religion, which regime of pleasures, makes the most sense, though you do need one, lest you regress into the bad infinity of freedom unbound.

**While the promise of religion ultimately disappoints, in
Houellebecq's view, he remains committed to faith and,
consequently, to something like love.**

It is obviously false to say that Houellebecq writes love stories, and it is also obviously true. In the midst of eros evacuated of feeling, in an age when humans are little more than subjects of capitalist desire, the force of religion comes from the way it sanctions action that is unmotivated by reason or desire. This is also the downfall of religion, for it sacrifices mystery to explain itself in terms of reason and desire. What Houellebecq (himself, in his literary practice, and his characters) seeks is faith itself, motivation to persist despite good reason to give up. In other words, Houellebecq is doing more than toying with faith because it reads as transgressive in our age, as Žižek and a generation of European and North American theorists often seem to do. Houellebecq presents faith as something like a strange virtue, a habit that is developed in spite of rather than out of surrounding social forces. It is a habit that has, as its

prerequisite, the clearing away of mystifications. Seeing the world so bared, as Houellebecq's aging male protagonists come to do, the pressing question is why to persist, and the practice that results is persistence – not glamorously, not adventurously, but nevertheless, persistence. Mixed in that persistence is, more often than not, heterosexual love, its memory and its lost promise. Love reminds these men, in a quite Christian way, that faith may not be reasonable or desirable, but it is warranted, for the capitalist subject is not all there is. Here we are in an entirely new landscape than that of the nouveau right, which essentially traffics in mystifications and their symbols, manufacturing reason and desire entirely at odds with the practice of faith (and blocking the possibility of genuine love).

Houellebecq is, at the end of the day, a philosopher of law.

As odd as it may seem, the closest French thinker to Houellebecq from the first half of the twentieth century may not be Georges Bataille but is instead Simone Weil. Bataille has an entirely instrumental view of law: it is an instrument that allows for transcending and so transforming the world through its transgression. For Weil, law (paradigmatically for her, the laws of mathematics), which is to say *the thing to do*, is all we can cling to, and what we must cling to. The task, for her, is to shed the mystifications of the social so that we simply do the thing to do. When that is our practice, we are open to grace. We cannot save ourselves. Whether grace is something we experience or not is outside of our control. The only thing we can do is work on ourselves, over and over, to identify and purge the way our desires and reasons are shaped by the great beast which is society. So, too, with Houellebecq: in his characters and in his aesthetics, he takes as his task stripping away illusions so we can see people doing what they do, doing the thing to do. (Such actions, of course, are not insulated from the social, but the important thing is that they are not justified by the social; they are brute facts, brute laws.) Aesthetically, Houellebecq expresses this with flat, mechanical prose, even across scenes and times. Substantively, Houellebecq commits himself to the primacy of sociology, against psychology and critical theory. He does not aspire to unmask mystifications in order to show their genuine cause, in some mental or social pathology. He unmasks them in order to enter the realm of pure law. He poses the question, philosophically serious but so often dismissed as juvenile: once we realize that most of what we do is simply what one does, how are we to continue? As with Weil, Houellebecq's answer is to submit ourselves to law, to do what one does, because one has faith – that perhaps there is something like grace, grounded in love.

The political challenge of the age is to demonstrate that loneliness need not be apolitical or anti-political.

This is crystal clear in the case of Weil, and her age is not so different from ours. In the case of Houellebecq, rejecting politics is one component

of the rejection of mystification, and so of capitalist subjection. However, the artist should not be trusted as an interpreter of their work, and it is always rather embarrassing when they attempt to occupy this role. Houellebecq's novels are not really *about* loneliness, or about the alienation of the aging European man. They are about the realization that, almost all the time, we are doing what one is to do. Houellebecq need not make arguments against the mystifications of the age; he need not *critique*. He represents, in a voice that complements the content represented. In this, he has been enormously successful. He is, in fact, the great French novelist of his generation. And his books are read. They are wildly popular. The question of merely doing-what-one-does resonates broadly, not just with aging European men. Houellebecq's novels are not popular because of their sex scenes, or for their romances, or for their science fiction. The reason for their popularity is the combination of aesthetic and content that mirrors the present age, and gives voice to frustration with the options before us – the options marked as political. It would be misleading to say that Houellebecq's readers form some new sort of community, a community of singularities, along the lines debated by Maurice Blanchot and Jean-Luc Nancy. Rather, the popularity of Houellebecq marks a dissatisfaction with the political landscape as it is presented to us, an openness to voices and practices that would radically reconfigure our world. This is precisely the moment that creates an opening for the *nouveau* right.

Houellebecq invites us to read against transgression, not for transgression.

Since Houellebecq first rose to popularity, the charisma of the transgressive has reached still greater heights, or depths. Social media has moved from text to image to video, and mainstream media are increasingly integrating social media practices into their platforms. This dynamic feeds the *nouveau* right, whose buzz gains as influencers and their followers gape at the apparent transgressions of the left and contradictions of normcore liberals. In the same but opposite way, it feeds the left. And moderates (that is, traditional liberals and conservatives) become all the more self-satisfied as they gape at what they view as the extremes. From *Elementary Particles* to *Submission* and beyond, Houellebecq teaches his readers to bracket the emotional jolt transgression is supposed to produce, looking instead at what is done, what one ought to do. Early in *Platform*, the protagonist Michel apologizes to a police inspector for being “a disappointing witness.” The inspector responds: “‘All witnesses are disappointing,’ he said. I pondered this aphorism for awhile. Before us stretched the endless monotony of fields.” In an important sense, this exchange points to the very heart of Houellebecq's writing, and his relationship with readers. All witnesses are disappointing, which is not the same as saying that witnesses should

stop looking or speaking, or that inspectors should stop recording. Rather, it is from this place of coolness that we find – not revolution, not complacency, but scientific calculation tethered to wild imagination. From this place, we learn to live forever, born anew into a world that no longer depends on the articulated power of the old.

Houellebecq need not be a white man.

The cringe that Houellebecq's name evokes in some circles is directly attached to the sense that his work is so white, so European, so masculine (or misogynistic, if the two are not taken as synonyms). This is at least half the reason that Houellebecq is associated with the *nouveau* right: they, too, are seemingly excessive in these respects. In the obvious sense, Houellebecq does have certain demographic characteristics, and it may be that his readers do, too. But Houellebecq is also directly addressing the state of the conversation in Black, decolonial, feminist, and queer studies, conversations that in some ways are turning again to the '60s, or to an age of transgression, and that are, consequently, mismatching the lived experience of those they purport to represent. Black studies scholars, for example, are excited about Bataille, seeing in his work a way of undoing the libidinal forces that structure anti-Black racism through illicit forms of desiring that challenge the tangle of sovereign self, sovereign state, and white supremacy. Queer theorists, a couple stages further along, ask what comes after the anti-normativity that they have so long taken as foundational, that they have taken to be definitive of queerness – and struggle to answer this question in theoretical and political ways that are not crudely pragmatic. In these various fields, theorizing runs away from experience, with a result very much like that depicted by Houellebecq with respect to bourgeois Western Europe. The result, in both cases, is a political field frozen with options that speak to no one beyond an intellectual elite, and even there it is no more than false consciousness. Which Black Americans does “fugitivity” really describe, and to which queer lives does “negativity” actually speak? When political options dramatically mismatch experience, the ground is fertile for new political movements to emerge, for the *nouveau* right to emerge. The reading practices and, to put it rather romantically, ascetic practices that Houellebecq describes, and the faith that he lauds, may be the only defense against the next phase in the development of the *nouveau* right, which is already upon us: its embrace of multiculturalism.