

## **THE ABSENCE OF OTHERNESS AND THE FICTION OF CORPOREALITY IN MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ'S PROSE**

**Abstract:** The current paper aims to illustrate how Michel Houellebecq's prose revolves around the failure of otherness. His character, always male, is in search of indemnifying options to rebuild the connections that have been suddenly interrupted, such as miscarriages or losing partners due to suicide. At first sight, the woman's figure naturally meets these requirements. Otherness is being reduced to a barren body, that acts as an extension of the traditional female role: woman as an erotic partner and maternal figure. The inability to communicate, the split between the two above-mentioned fixed roles leads to the abnegation of the self while failing to be defined through otherness. My thesis will argue that Houellebecq's prose grows as a fiction of otherness: excessively eroticised bodies that impel communication, dispersed families by repudiation of sons as feasible otherness, artificial heroes, either orphans or abandoned, incapable of exceeding their own individuality, replace the claim for the heroic in contemporary French writing.

**Key words:** corporeality, otherness, erotic partner, motherhood, fictionalisation

### **Premises**

Michel Houellebecq's writing brings together some of the most dramatic problems of the past century by means of a prose that diminishes the significance of the realism in order to make it accessible. Neither the political aspect nor the social one is omitted: dispersed families, the solitude of the individual, erotic addiction, religious failure, racism, body deformity, body image obsession; all of these are converted into fiction, in a prose nourished by the ordinary. The fictionalisation of reality as a process will be treated here as a pretext for delving deeper to explore the issues at hand. For Houellebecq, the way to transpose the real world into prose is a reaction to crises of the text (dysfunctional worlds as alternatives worlds, showing the real issues the reader already confronts) and a way to signal the proximity of the

real and virtual, working almost in simultaneity. What Houellebecq intends by appealing to prose is to describe a sort of narrative schizophrenia when fiction is not invention, but translation. The author's fame is also derived from his selection of controversial themes. Characters cannot exit a deteriorated reality; amplified sexuality, escapism in peculiar spaces, temporary hallucinations are only effective for a limited amount of time. Without prolonging the debate over the narrative scheme and the composition strategies of this prose, the present paper aims to prove that there is a steady ground on which the Houellebecq's narrative is built. For that matter, going from the female body image, as the necessary partner for a narrator, who is always a man, I will attempt to present the construction of a faulty alterity, incapable of overcoming its own individuality, but always intending to do so.

I will discuss the problem of the obsessive gaze, the setting of an amplified *voyeurism*. For Houellebecq's character, the other is just a sterile object for a subject to change. The gaze is functioning here as a way of connection with an alterity reduced to bodily existence. To overcome the loneliness, the individuality rejected to Houellebecq, the character thus manages to maintain a minimum contact. The gaze is, at the same time, a form of possession. Once seen, the other becomes not just accessible for a relationship, but already involved in one. Moreover, this object becomes a substitute of the traditional family roles; the maternal, as well as the paternal figure, is affected. The inability to communicate while also being aware of an addiction to alterity leads to captivity within a detested body, and, consequently, towards a permanent state of isolation.

This paper also focuses on corporeality, as it is defined in literary theory and methodology. While Roland Barthes and Algirdas Julius Greimas have shown how the changing meaning of this term influenced literature and writing modes at large, I will use those changes to explain Houellebecq's addiction to a character without a body of one's own, always dependent on another to define himself. On this matter, I do not side with structuralists, who insist on the reader's body. I am closer, on the other hand, to the views of Alexander Maxwell and Henrietta Mondry who, following Michel Foucault, treat corporeality as sexual body, as a projected identity without consistence, as a fiction of otherness. I use corporeality as a concept for body in fiction, in the reality constructed by the text. The meanings ascribed to corporeality are also a great concern in gender studies. This can be thought outside the feminist framework. In fact, corporeality shows the body as erotic object

beyond gender, a body used to reflect the need of identity impossible to find in himself and followed in the others.

In spite of Houellebecq being a relatively recent writer, his work has been studied in detail. Douglas Morrey, Angela Holzer, Virginie Hansson approached some of the themes mentioned here, without addressing the theme of otherness's embodiment: an alterity always subjected to another more powerful, an alterity reduced to a physical presence, inconsistent and limited. Houellebecq's prose is a projection of otherness: parents abandoning their children (as a potential alterity disowned), orphans searching throughout their entire life an alternative presence, but who are constrained to remain on the outskirts of society and to settle for the presence of a fake otherness and erotic connection.

### **Mediation of the view. The mechanical and sterile body**

Houellebecq's prose suffers from an obsession with the body, either that of the other or self-corporeality. Even the narrative functions as such: the story is narrated with tardiness, explained by the amplification of the details that illustrate a hyperbolised body, subject to the temporality which deforms it. The detailed descriptions configure a body that is almost "clinical of organs in action" (Biron 28-29).

In this context youthfulness is forbidden, therefore Houellebecq's characters seek unusual solutions rather progressively, over time, any possibility of salvation is nulled:

The conflict between individuals has not been subsided, in fact, it worsened, little by little become widespread over the human life. No refuge, no safe spot where characters could escape the hostile looks of the stranger and feel secure. The night is everywhere, even in broad daylight (Biron 28-29) .

In *The Elementary Particles*, the Tercian and Mepronizine overdoses amplify the hallucinations of an already ill body, which must abandon its erotic rituals. In *The Platform*, the degraded corporeality, the aged body, can function through the other's sexuality. The aged man retrieves his corporality by accessing a younger partner:

It is clear that in Michel Houellebecq's novels, the other's body holds a continuous power over the subject so that the relationship between subject and object is problematic. The other's body puts the subject on hold, possess its energy, time and space. He who wishes to possess becomes himself possessed. The human being living its desire is constantly possessed by the other (Teitsma 71).

All male characters aim to retrieve a young body through an erotic encounter with a younger woman. Bruno and Michel need a substitute in order to resume possession of their own identity. On the other hand, Janine Ceccaldi, the denaturated mother, embodies the wish to return to an eroticised body and give up her maternal qualities in exchange for an overflowing sexuality. Therefore, the inability to communicate as well as the failure of the couple comes from the multiple attempts to reduce the partner to corporeality. In fact, Bruno's excessive liberalism and his sexuality in *The Elementary Particles* are only failed efforts to overcome his individuality. However, the erotic games on campus, in isolated spaces, replace Christiane's, or Michel Dzerjinsky's, authentic love. In this writing, the fulfilment of love equals access to pleasure, most often outside the city, far from a social system promoting the objectified body, as a publicity tool, as merchandise. In this regard, sexual tourism in Thailand, an exotic space that, at first sight, escapes capitalism, substitutes the encounter of the erotic couple as it is illustrated in traditional prose.

Consumption and erotic manipulation of the body are forms of restoration of the distempered couple in Houellebecq's writing. Herbert Marcuse states that sexual freedom is a form of social effusion (Marcuse 77). None of the characters can fully experience eroticism. Following a failed teaching career cut short due to an intense erotic desire for one of his students, Bruno must change his place. His life continues, in the absence of a female presence, until meeting Christiane, a young woman well aware of her body, who manages to connect Bruno with a potential alterity. Simultaneously, Michel and Annabelle's seemingly solid relationship because of her pregnancy brings up the possibility of a functional alterity that will be canceled with the abortion.

When sexuality fails to become a way of accessing the other, the remaining solution, when facing loneliness, age, and erotic failure, although tragic, is suicide. Janine's aged body or Christiane and Annabelle's maimed ones, lacking in seduction and maternal qualities, must disappear. Otherwise, according to Vesterberg, "suicide is perfectly rational when the

discourse of human value is centered on the body, in fact, defined by its state and appearance, not only in its final stage of breakdown due to old age, but through every moment of a human life” (Vesterberg 10-11).

Isolated in an exotic space, Valérie and Michel’s relationship can overcome the logics of incongruity. At first, this love has all the chances to materialise and surpass narrator’s declared individualism: a beautiful, intelligent, young woman falls for a mature, rational as well as different, man. Naturally, this connection is strengthened by the same obsession with looks, the fiction of corporeality and diminishing the other to an image at the moment of the encounter:

A much younger woman, almost indiscreet, not older than twenty-seven years who followed Josiane with a canine obedience, who was introducing herself as Valérie... I understood then that this young woman was not at all obedient to Josiane: she was simply obedient in general, perhaps always ready to find a new master (Houellebecq, Platform, 21).

Moreover, the fascination provoked by the look triggers homoerotic and narcissistic manifestations. Either reflected in a mirror or on a publicity panel selling affordable female beauty, Valérie becomes aware of her own sexuality, shared with no restraints with Bérénice. Marked by homosexuality, Valérie’s initiation in erotic practices is an obstacle in what concerns her return to heterosexual relationships. Since the beginning, she seems vulnerable and dependent, always close to Josiane and obedient to her, constantly searching for someone to dominate her. Valérie is chosen by Michel because of the perfect association between her body and the idea of seduction and exercise of power. Their encounter does not fit the frame of a functional relationship, on the contrary, going beyond normality, Houellebecq intentionally passes the terminals of an authentic love story. He uses the pretext of naïve love, the innocence of the first dates, precisely to dissolve any hypothesis of a real couple (following in the footsteps of an Adamic couple) and to decrease the severity of the fiction. In a universe where the woman is nothing but merchandise, where in full ironical democracy she is a prostitute with rights in the service of the man who can legally use her, the kind of love that Valérie and Michel share is illicit.

Besides this false protection of the authentic couple, intros of forged relationships are seen false from the beginning, representative for this addiction with sterile, female

corporeality. Michel resorts to spatial isolation, on islands of sexuality, exotic and foreign, where communication by touch is still allowed. Therefore, the prostitute represents a pattern in the prose of Houellebecq. She stops being just a pretext of eccentricity, which estranges, in Derrida's terms, the fictional universe from the reader's reality and places him in a credible area through distancing. In *Platform*, the female prostitute functions perfectly as a temporary authentic partner, as another fiction of alterity:

on a lit billboard, with white font, three mermaids in bikini, with exaggerated breasts, were offering champagne cups to the potential visitor. About twelve girls, behind the window, turned their heads towards me [...] I chose number 7: firstly, because she was pretty and then because she seemed neither preoccupied with the TV channel, nor absorbed by a passionate conversation with the neighbour [...] I offered her a Coke at the bar, then went to the room. Her well-soaped beaver was rubbing my thighs like a brush (Houellebecq, *Platform*, 41).

Analysing all strategies of social manipulation, Houellebecq brings up the theme of power and faulty alterity again in *Submission*, his last novel. As previously done in the two novels already discussed, Houellebecq's protagonists try to reconfirm their identity and recover their youth by merging with an objectified female body: "I continued, year after year, to sleep with university students – the fact that I was the professor in relation to them did not change much. The age gap between me and them seemed insignificant at first... related to my status" (Houellebecq, *Submission*, 25). As it can easily be noted, the age difference rather becomes a difference in status and power. Later on, this difference, which implies a visible sexist element, is amplified through a type of policy that tries to reinstate the man as the master of the woman while hiding her corporeality and, at the same time, hiding the attributes which validate her sexuality and gender markers: "in the beginning she was a dare against Islam: a desecrated mosque, a woman forced to remove her veil under threat, different tricks of the sort" (Houellebecq, *Submission*, 82). The couple's incompatibility such as the removing of access to alterity derive from a radical separation of the genders by isolation in the Islamic logic: "under no circumstances can college be mix; the only safe successions are those destined for women. It is hoped that the majority of women will be orientated towards housekeeping and early marriage, as soon as they pass elementary school" (Houellebecq, *Submission* 82).

Thereby, relationships in Houellebecq's three novels denounce an alterity crisis which is either extremely censored (in *Submission*) or reduced to a nude corporeality without any chance of functioning in a way other than erotic. After all, wishing to abandon motherhood and dedicate oneself to sexuality transforms the woman in an object of sterile pleasure. Facile accessibility, without any obstacles, cancels the authenticity of the couple and its traditional composition. Actually, the two dimensions of the potential other, the two views of the woman, overlap due to both denouncing a fake, vicious alterity as well as the incapacity to renounce an aggressive corporeality.

### **The omitted motherhood. A failed version of otherness**

If the first attempt to have a relation with one's otherness – through the destructured couple in the absence of an authentic partner (defined as a partner capable of love and of a non-sexual communication) – does not fail, there is, for Houellebecq, a second option for meeting again the other: as one's family or immediate alterity. Nevertheless, as Biron remarked recently, in these novels neither solution of overcoming loneliness and individuality is available anymore (Biron 31-34). In the universe of the novel, nothing escapes singularity and isolation. The heroes of these novels are either orphans or abandoned children who refuse in turn to assume the paternal role. The parents presented in his writing also always dismiss their status and responsibilities in favour of the advantages offered by their sexuality.

Returning to Janine Ceccaldi, she prefers the barren, infertile femininity, because of which she deplores her maternal features. Moreover, for the women in *The Elementary Particles*, the access to the ultimate experience is forbidden and, every time the birth seems possible, it is suspended, interrupted, through a tragic gesture which amputates the woman's body. In fact, the repudiation of the newborn finds its origins in a conviction that warrants a non-erotic corporeality, a cancellation of sexuality, required in order to justify the social presence of the woman. The infertile sexuality replaces the functional motherhood. For example, during his partner's pregnancy, Bruno rejects her due to her crippled femininity, which can no longer be the object of its visual desires: "Entering the room, I immediately realised that it was over. Her buttocks were exploding, bound by the garters, her breasts couldn't defy the breastfeeding" (Houellebecq, *Particles* 140).

Furthermore, Annabelle can be for Michael nothing else but an eroticised body. The diminishing of the body through abortion is explained by the need of living in a competition with the others. Houellebecq's women, as well as the men who reject their paternity, must be young and beautiful in order to arouse their partner. Janine abandons her children, who remain in their grandmother's care. This second mother is a potential other, accessible, although unstable due to the age and to the senescence. For her, motherhood is but a random experience, especially when her passion for her child outgrows her maternal love (if only we think about the erotic initiation "in the family" of her stepson, Di Meola's son): "Motherhood, she was thinking, is an experience each woman should live... the annoying issues generated by raising a child quickly became for the couple involved hardly compatible with their personal liberty ideal" (Houellebecq, *Particles* 28).

Bruno's sexual deviations and Michel's tragic loneliness are the results of a double desertion – the absence of a father figure and the mother's voluntary disappearance. Any maternal relationship is disrupted from the beginning, by the same eroticised look mentioned earlier, with a first incestuous glance in early childhood: "I entered the room. They were both asleep. I hesitated for a few seconds then I pulled the curtains. Mother squealed and for a moment I thought she would open her eyes. Her buttocks opened wildly. I got down on my knees in front of her vulva" (Houellebecq, *Particles* 70). Afterward, these incestuous looks would extend, damaging her relationship with her own son, who becomes a competitor for virility, for erotic partners: "it was almost the rivalry state specific to men" (Houellebecq, *Particles* 202). Michel, in his turn, no longer raises claims for paternal care when Annabelle gives up her son.

Consequently, Michel will be burying his son and his mother, Janine Ceccaldi, as well as giving up her father. This novel debuted under the sign of the absent paternal figure, under the sign of death: "father died a year ago. I do not believe the theory according to which we only become adults once our parents die; in reality, we never grow up" (Houellebecq, *Platform* 11). Cold and senseless, Michel's line surely delimits the entire context: the relationship with his father is not at all affectionate; it is simply a necessity. The countervailing family that would complete the failed couple and bring balance to his relationship with the alterity does not succeed here either:



“I did not grow up in a familial cocoon, nor in any other place where someone would care for me and support me in case of depression, who would act enthusiastic when I succeeded (...) I was a celibate, without any children (...) like an animal, I lived and I will die alone” (Houellebecq, Platform 105).

This lucid loneliness affects Houellebecq's couples. After Valérie's death, the separation from Bruno, the separation from Myriam, all characters named Michel (as alter egos, fictional representations of the author himself) but also François, stay isolated in a world of individualism which they detest, faking a state of independence, always dependent on the contact with the other.

### **The failure of male alterity and the obsession with community**

Houellebecq's novels always start from a strongly engaged, tensionate point, the other's corporality:

From a simple narrative level, the other's body is the engine of the story, a desired object by the protagonists. Narrativity, by itself, is based on the subject's orientation towards an object invested with value. The subject is investing the object with the value it possess; therefore, it does not exist without the subject (Greimas 15).

However, as argued above, the female figure, eroticised in every context (be it as an erotic partner or the representation of motherhood), is far from being qualified as authentic alterity. Hence the attempt of returning to male corporality, an alterity, at first sight, de-corporealised, that would establish a functional communication. But in Houellebecq's prose, the man very often is the main subject of the discourse, the one initiating the dialogue that is afterward taken over by the feminine form. The instability of narrative cases, fluid characters changing shape and status according to the other, is clearer in *The Elementary Particles* and *Platform*. But for Michel, who rarely renounces his discourse advantage given by his central role in the narrative, Bruno or Di Meola become, surely, partial alterities. In his relationship with his stepbrother, Bruno becomes a reversed mirror image, a doubled failure, who cannot substitute, with his presence, the losses of Michel's life because all his actions are rather

directed towards satisfying his own needs. The formalism of connections, even brotherly ones, and their segmentation since the beginning (the two are unified by a label that is also separating them: stepbrothers) is announcing the falsehood of the otherness.

Bruno and Michel are just products of a faulty motherhood. Nothing is real in their communication and they are incapable of dominating their own erotic impulses, which cannot overcome a sterile discourse. Each of them pursues in their development an image of a distant otherness: the mother, the son, the lover; a neighbouring alterity, functional at first sight because of its status, is just as well as in the case of paternal connections, submissive. In this regard, Djerzinski's conclusions are eloquent:

In this place where they are dominated by fear, human beings learn to live and die; in the middle of their mental space, separation is born alongside with distance and suffering. Regarding this matter, few things are to be said: the lover hears the call of his sweetheart beyond oceans and mountains, beyond oceans and mountains the mother hears the call of her son. Love binds forever. The practice of good is a bond, the practice of wrong is a fragmentation of the bond. Separation is the other name of the evil; is just as well the other name for lying (Houellebecq, Particles 354).

Since the entire family is distorted, then seemingly restored based on criteria with no authenticity (blood-related, thus biologically connected), the fraternal relationship is not at all convincing. In the absence of a paternal figure and thus a potentially functional communication with masculinity, Michel and Bruno become incompatible with one another, as Jerry Andrew Varsava observes while theorizing the concept of “dystopian thoughts”: “With the pattern already established in adolescence, Michel's life is largely devoid of sexual activity and, in general, verges on asceticism. For his part, Bruno is a dipsomaniac, coveting casual sex, and an inveterate masturbator; he loses his teaching job after sexually assaulting a student in class. Man is not only a beast to others but, frankly, a beast of himself” (Varsava, 152). False complementarities, organized by Bohr's criteria according to which every minor element contributes to assembling a perfectly articulated world, the half-brothers Bruno and Michel embody that principle: “they live opposing lives, but nevertheless rely by way of an almost inexplicable relationship upon each other, without being able to express their dependency” (Holzer, 7). On the other hand, Di Meola, another male character in *The*

*Elementary Particles*, is also deconstructed as alterity. Addicted to Janine Ceccaldi's sexuality and to her many shady affairs, he abandons his son who goes through a forced process of growing up. Thus, in the absence of a corporeal connection between him and Janine, he fails to fit in any other kind of community:

Seeking ever more outrageous situations, David di Meola, a thirty-something failed rock-'n'-roller, takes up where the Marquis de Sade and Manson left off, narcotizing himself through unspeakable violence and serial murder. Just as Bruno's hedonism is a product of the moral bankruptcy of the period in which he lives, so too is di Meola's vice, di Meola's biographer sees the etiology of di Meola's crimes in social-deterministic terms (Holzer, 8).

Moreover, it is not just he who subtracts himself from having a role in the community but he also diminishes the chances of fitting in for those around him. Starting with his son, towards whom he fails as a paternal model, and continuing with Janine, to whom he offers the possibility of exhibiting her sexual desires on his stepson, Di Meola breaks the connections with the world outside his own individuality. However, in the novel *Platform*, the character is taking shelter from any masculinity that could become an alterity:

I never felt comfortable among men. I was eleven years old when for the first time, a girl showed me her beaver; I was enchanted on the spot, I loved that small, strange organ (...) My passion for beavers had not abated, I was even considering it one of the last fully human qualities, of the rest I was not so sure (Houellebecq, *Platform* 84).

That is why homosexuality is more of a form of lesbianism. With a fascinated view, the erotic script becomes, for the male protagonist, a projection of the idea of a couple which he constructs from a distance. Although in a continuous search for partnership, cooperation, thus for communication the alleged houellebecquian hero, refuses the partnership of a male. Unlike *The Elementary Particles*, the failed alterity is even stronger from the beginning, considering the artificial generic barriers. Hence, if for Michel "to visit a prostitute means to keep a minimum human contact" (Houellebecq, *Particles* 346), but repeating the gesture leads to becoming a cliché, ultimately, any connection with a community turns out to be dysfunctional: "we learn to live on our own, to be independent; it is not necessarily a good

habit. If I ever wanted to have something similar to a domestic partnership, this was the moment” (Houellebecq, *Particles* 144).

Houellebecq's men are animalistic, completely lacking consistency, in a world that is unable to discover themselves unless they are alone. Thus here, “masturbation (be it sexual, critical or artistic) turns in a sort of forged distancing where the look of the other, fueled by erotic desire, leads to physical separation even with touching, thus with closeness. This movement of simultaneous closeness and distancing is one of Michel Houellebecq characteristics. (Ågerup 34). Besides, Houellebecq is critically distancing himself from reality, by highlighting every tense moment where the strong constancies of the traditional world (as family, identity, couple, alterity) are fragmented. At the same time, he is drawing near to it by transitioning the reality to fiction through a selection of problems touching those symbols of stability. Crucible narratives, Houellebecq's prose brings together, in a perfectly articulated logic, some of the most tragic subtleties of the human existence.

In a place where individuality matters the most, when contemporary writers do nothing but denounce this very break of identity, this absence of a personal self, Houellebecq overturns the hypothesis. For him, individuality is synonymous with solitude and the primary need, that of completeness, of agreement with the other, with the outside world is opposing the lone self. Houellebecq is not denouncing, as Versava previously believed, “Locke's codification of basic personal liberties” (Versava 8) according to which all empowered social instances, as well as traditional values, are subjecting the individual to a group but he is retraining this false subordination as an authentic form of communication that is impossible to restore.

### **Conclusion**

Michel Houellebecq's novels are fictional representations of failed forms of otherness. Throughout this paper, which aimed to shape the image of the individual in a universe where he refuses any compatibility with the other, I have proposed two saving hypothesis: love or woman as an erotic partner, and motherhood. But when the first is reduced to the corporeality, to a fading image without consistency, subject to the notion of pleasure and objectified, it cannot become a partner in an authentic couple. At the same time, the couple's failure is

doubled by the failure of motherhood, always constrained by the sexual element, by the woman who will not renounce her erotic potential.

Furthermore, there can be no acceptable male alterity in Houellebecq's writing. Man is nothing more than an initiator in communication and never the one who will carry the message further. The homoerotic script, onanism and other communication formulas that writers generally abuse of, are ridiculed by the French writer when he silences them. Their recalibration into new imaginative formulas (lesbianism, oppression of the images and looks, lack of male corporality) brands the Houellebecq's prose. The title, *The Elementary Particles*, which in fact contains the entire fictional construct, sums up this failure of integration. Part of a larger universe, the singular fragments are mandatory for a system depending upon them, but to which they no longer belong. The entire method of acting, even those forms of representation of the personal existence, are structured around this obsession of integration, of fitting in. Nothing natural, nothing authentic, dreams, projections of every sort, life itself captures limited opportunities of self-exceeding, of openness towards others: "you still have to live, to connect to people [...] we gather memories so we can be less lonely when we die" (Houellebecq, *Particles* 101). In the absence of a hope for salvation, Houellebecq's hero lives in a perfectly self-coherent state of captivity, updated within limits, profoundly contemporary: alterity is always physically present, immediate, but accessing it beyond appearance is impossible. After all, fake collectivity hides the individual's tragic loneliness.

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