

“To Stand a Chance”: Quantum Uncertainty and Religious Conversion in Michel Houellebecq’s *Submission*

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Abstract

Michel Houellebecq’s novel, *Submission* (2015), is structured around the speculative premise that in the year 2022 the Muslim Brotherhood could become the dominant political party in France, leading to a society-wide shift in values and practices. This paper explores how Houellebecq uses religious conversion in the novel as a literary metaphor for quantum uncertainty. By lacing the patchwork plot with ambiguity and satire, Houellebecq tries to reconcile the random and predetermined elements of human actions, given the physical reality of our atom-based world and existence. Against the background of his selfish male and female characters, Houellebecq plays with the possibility of transcending the pitifulness of the contemporary human condition, which both he and his characters ultimately achieve not through religion but through fiction. Interpreting *Submission* in the context of theories about the unpredictable, computational nature of the universe raises interesting questions about the programmability of human behavior and the use of speculative fiction as a tool for generating alternative futures.

Keywords

speculative fiction, conversion, quantum uncertainty, computation, mutation, generative,
Michel Houellebecq

The universe is nothing but a furtive arrangement of elementary particles. A figure in transition toward chaos. That is what will finally prevail. The human race will disappear. Other races in turn will appear and disappear. The skies will be glacial and empty, traversed by the feeble light of half-dead stars. These too will disappear. Everything will disappear. And human actions are as free and as stripped of meaning as the unfettered movements of the elementary particles. Good, evil, morality, sentiments? Pure ‘Victorian fictions.’ All that exists is egotism. Cold, intact, and radiant.

—Michel Houellebecq

H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life

We have a picture for how complexity arises, because if the universe is computationally capable, maybe we shouldn’t be so surprised that things are so entirely out of control.

—Seth Lloyd

“The Computational Universe”

One can see why Houellebecq has excited such ecstatic reviews. It is exciting to encounter a vision of such furious logic, unafraid to do its angry computation on the page, bold with social and moral outrage.

—James Wood

“Love, Actually”

Michel Houellebecq’s literary oeuvre is a unique blend of science fiction and sordid realism. Houellebecq gives us depressing depictions of life in contemporary Western societies that have degenerated into the meaningless commodification of sex, food, art, and leisure activities, governed by the logical yet senseless pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain. The futility and randomness of human existence are recurring themes in Houellebecq’s misanthropic writings. He deals with these themes in both the content and construction of his novels, using narrative ambiguity and object-oriented sensory descriptions to create storylines that mimic the atom-based randomness of quantum mechanics.¹ By playing with speculative futuristic and

¹ Quantum mechanics shows that extremely small interactions on a molecular level can be used to mathematically explain a wide range of biological and physical phenomena. Seth Lloyd, a professor of mechanical engineering and physics at MIT, has used quantum mechanics as the basis for claiming

scientific elements to generate his narratives, Houellebecq is constantly challenging his characters and his readers to imagine alternative futures and the possibility of transcendence, all the while dragging them back to the harsh conditions of being human in a scientific universe. Reading through the author's cynical ambivalence, I will contend that Houellebecq uses religious conversion as a metaphor for quantum uncertainty in his latest novel, *Submission* (2015). He leads his protagonist, François, to a moment of ambiguous religious conversion by breaking François's journey into distinct logical pieces that cascade into a computational conversion.

In this paper, I explore how Houellebecq's appeal to science is fundamentally rooted in the turn to theories of quantum mechanics in the early twentieth century and, more recently, the turn to information technologies. By structuring his narrative around the possibility of radical change on both a societal and individual level, Houellebecq dives into the principle of quantum uncertainty. He uses ambiguity and satire to call into question the idea that free will exists in a universe that is determined by randomness, one in which human life can be broken down into discrete atoms and forces and "computed." Houellebecq responds to the regime of computation by using writing as a means of self-determination. Through his fiction he is able to ask existential questions about human consciousness as opposed to the mere physicality of the human body and our corporeal life; he does so through the greed of his male characters and the reproductive capacities of his females. I would like to build upon the existing scholarship on Houellebecq's fundamentally materialist worldview (Betty)² by looking at how this author uses a speculative scenario—one foregrounding "metaphysical mutation"—in *Submission* as a metaphor for the computability of the universe and human behavior.³

Houellebecq's use of quantum physics as a means for understanding the logical yet arbitrary nature of human behavior feeds into a broader discourse about the computability of the universe, and more specifically into the physical and metaphysical claim that the universe is digital, and that natural human behaviors are

that the universe is "computation": "Merely by existing and evolving in time—by existing—any physical system registers information, and by evolving in time it transforms or processes that information" (Lloyd n. pag.).

² Louis Betty draws upon Houellebecq's canon of work to show that Houellebecq uses materialist horror as a philosophical and aesthetic response to the nihilistic metaphysical trends in postmodern Europe (*Without God*).

³ Houellebecq defines metaphysical mutations as "radical, global transformations in the values to which a majority subscribe" and he emphasizes they are important and rare occurrences, stating that "the values to which a majority subscribe at any given time determine society's economic and political structures and social mores" (*Elementary* 3).

generated by the constant computation of molecular variables according to very small logical operations. By putting “conversion” at the center of his novel, Houellebecq is directly calling into question the assumption that salvation and transcendence are possible. François’s religious conversion, which could stand as an “*act of grace*” (*Submission* 77; emphasis in original) amidst meaningless chaos, hangs suspended in the conditional tense as a likely outcome, one based on a computation of his biological factors. The conversion emerges, randomly but logically in retrospect, like the effect of colliding elementary particles in a computational universe.⁴

The plot of *Submission* takes off in near-future France. It is the year 2022, and in a tight presidential election the Muslim Brotherhood becomes the country’s dominant political party, narrowly overtaking Marine Le Pen and the nationalist-populist National Front. We follow the psychological journey of a middle-aged academic, François, as he tries to reconcile his decidedly secular lifestyle with the rising dominance of Islam and Sharia law in French society. François is guided by an intense personal and professional engagement with the literary works of the nineteenth-century French novelist J.-K. Huysmans. He rambles somewhat listlessly through the riot-torn streets of Paris and out to a monastery in Rocamadour, looking for meaning and a path toward contentment in his stagnating life. His aging body is riddled with ailments, his sexual desire, which he has satiated through casual relationships with his students and trysts with prostitutes, is waning, and he subsists on take-out food and frozen meals from Monoprix. By the end of the novel François has supposedly converted to Islam and abandoned his pursuit of pleasure and comfort. His journey along the way has nonetheless been guided by materialistic and corporeal desires, which Houellebecq brings to life in rich, aesthetic descriptions of trivial and sensuous physical details that evolve in parallel with his study of J.-K. Huysmans’s conversion to Catholicism over a century earlier.

Houellebecq’s Appeal to Science: Neo-Naturalist, Anti-Modern, or Post-Modern?

Houellebecq is divisive. Regenia Gagnier comments that this author is regarded as both “the novelist in France today who best comprehends the crisis of the *fin de*

⁴ N. Katherine Hayles outlines a theory of materiality that she calls the Computational Universe, drawing upon the work of Stephen Wolfram, Leonard A. Adelman, Daniel Hillis, Konrad Zuse, John Conway, Christopher Langton, and John von Neumann on simple systems of cellular automata that generate complex patterns and the consequences that this has for metaphysics and the nature of literary texts (16).

siècle in the face of modernity,” and the straw man for a host of unattractive epithets, as she cites from a 2000 *New York Times Magazine* article by Emily Eakin: “a pornographer, Stalinist, racist, sexist, nihilist, reactionary, eugenicist and a homophobe” (422). Houellebecq’s controversial statements, both in his novels and in the media, have earned him a reputation as the *enfant terrible* of French literature. Always unafraid to voice unpopular opinions, in *Submission* the author engages more directly with contemporary political debates than in his other works, although it is unclear whether he is voicing his own political opinions or trying to diagnose the actual landscape in today’s France. Ander Berg-Sørensen calls attention to Houellebecq’s use of satire as a form of socio-political diagnosis and wonders whether he is fulfilling or abusing his responsibility as an author (134). Of course, to reduce Houellebecq to a caricature of an anti-social iconoclast is to miss the unique blends of science and poetics in his fiction. Many scholars have, after all, resisted the temptation to dismiss Houellebecq’s inflammatory novels as dangerous and deviant, opting to analyze them instead as serious works set in cultural, literary, political, and philosophical contexts. I consider myself to be one of them.

Thus I would take issue with analyses of Houellebecq that interpret his work as reactionary, anti-modern or arch-conservative, or as belonging to the naturalist literary movement of the late nineteenth century. While Houellebecq does indeed draw from the realist, naturalist, and decadent literary movements that preceded him, his ambivalent treatment of free will and biological determinism, as well as his fundamental belief in the randomizing power of quantum uncertainty, make him a novelist who is deeply rooted in and engaged with post-modernist, post-humanist discourse. Houellebecq’s appeal to science, though reminiscent of nineteenth-century naturalism, is different because it is based on the twentieth-century turn to quantum physics. Marco Caracciolo astutely dissects the ways in which Houellebecq confronts the complex problems of consciousness through his fiction, rendering physicalism and quantum mechanics understandable in his portrayals of the “atomization of society” (492). Whereas the nineteenth-century naturalists were using physics and chemistry to grapple with the existential ramifications of Darwinian biology, Houellebecq is grappling with the existential ramifications of quantum uncertainty and the computational universe.

Throughout Houellebecq’s literary canon, his deterministic, scientific, gritty portrayal of humanity harkens back to nineteenth-century naturalist authors like J.-K. Huysmans, Émile Zola, Guy de Maupassant, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser. Marc Smeets contends that Houellebecq’s commitment to telling the truth about contemporary French society, even when it is unpopular or unattractive, situates him

within the nineteenth-century realist-naturalist literary traditions of Balzac, Zola, and Huysmans:

“To be true,” such seems to be the mission that Houellebecq has given himself over to being merciless or unpleasant. The objective here is neither to study how the author of *The Elementary Particles* analyzes society, nor to see what polemical effects he creates in and by his texts, but to interrogate the process of crystallization of his multiple literary controversies, which are written certainly in a very French literary tradition dating back to the nineteenth century. (100)⁵

In his 2005 article “Utopian Yearnings, Dystopian Thoughts: Houellebecq’s *The Elementary Particles* and the Problem of Scientific Communitarianism,” Jerry Varsava notes that “Houellebecq works hard to establish a nexus of determinism in *The Elementary Particles* that calls to mind the enabling premise of literary naturalism. Humankind conducts itself in a rather bestial fashion, the literary naturalist asserts, pursuing self-aggrandizement, seeking to sate personal desires, while paying no heed to others or to society at large” (148). While Varsava draws links between the foundational laws of economic, biological, and social determinism that permeate *The Elementary Particles* and the work of Zola, he concludes that “*The Elementary Particles* apotheosizes science and its capacity to conquer the contingencies posed by self and other, by time and place” (160). Nonetheless, the spirituality and poetics that Varsava draws out of Houellebecq’s work signifies a departure from the bleak determinism of the nineteenth-century naturalists, where the deterministic laws of nature generally lead to man’s demise. I will return later in this paper to the question of how Houellebecq uses science as a metaphor, in his works, for a form of literature that controls human behavior but also offers humans the possibility of resisting, subverting, and finding imperfect salvation.

Regenia Gagnier draws interesting parallels between Houellebecq’s work and that of J.-K. Huysmans, saying that both are works of literary decadence (“The Decadence”). She asserts that Huysmans is the best example of decadence, which she

⁵ « Être vrai », telle semble être la mission que Houellebecq s’est donnée quitte à être impitoyable ou déplaisant. L’objectif ici n’est pas d’étudier comment l’auteur des *Particules élémentaires* analyse la société ni de voir quels effets polémiques il crée dans et par ses textes, mais plutôt de s’interroger sur les processus de cristallisation de ces multiples controverses littéraires, lesquelles s’inscrivent certainement dans une tradition littéraire bien française qui remonte au XIX^e siècle” (100).

defines as an “anarchistic style in which everything is sacrificed to the development of the individual parts” (420).

Drawing comparisons between Houellebecq and Huysmans is unavoidable: Houellebecq places Huysmans’s life and writings at the center of *Submission*. The protagonist, François, is a Huysmans scholar who looks to Huysmans as his intellectual kindred spirit and “faithful friend,” as we learn straight away in the opening line of *Submission*:

Through all the years of my sad youth Huysmans remained a companion, a faithful friend; never once did I doubt him, never once was I tempted to drop him or take up another subject; then, one afternoon in June 2007, after waiting and putting it off as long as I could, even slightly longer than was allowed, I defended my dissertation, ‘Joris-Karl Huysmans: Out of the Tunnel,’ before the jury of the University of Paris IV-Sorbonne.
(3)

The life and writings of J.-K. Huysmans are woven through the novel, shaping both the plot and François’s psychological transformation.

Gagnier claims that Huysmans’s style of decadence is very much alive in Houellebecq’s work:

It appears that decadence is still with us as a distortion between the part/individual and whole/collective. The question is whether the decadence of the West as a materialist, commodified culture that has lost the kinds of fulfillment that family and religion offered, the target of Huysmans and Houellebecq, is absolutely irreversible, or permanent?
(426)

Gagnier’s analysis of Houellebecq as a decadent author supports my thesis that we should read François’s conversion in *Submission* as a generative process that, through his discrete and individual actions, leads him back toward a converging social movement. Her description of decadence as a deconstructive style also agrees with my reading of Houellebecq’s literature as a fictional metaphor for quantum mechanics. At their root, both readings see Houellebecq’s writings as contending with the concept of part vs. whole, individual vs. collective. Houellebecq already knows that his quest to “locate” meaning is futile, since quantum physics has shown that all existence lies in the interaction of discrete molecular parts, and computation has shown us the power

of algorithms to manipulate discrete bits of information. The awareness of this futility lies at the core of François's conversion to Islam.

While the parallels between Houellebecq's works and nineteenth-century realists-naturalists are obvious, I read Houellebecq as a fundamentally post-modern author inasmuch as in the form and content of his novels, quantum physics is set in relation to existential questions of consciousness and free will (Caracciolo 488). In the face of the existential threat, not just of increasing individualism but of atomization in our modern world, biology leads François back toward social cohesion as a prerequisite for self-preservation, quite literally. The declining birth rate among the individualistic, liberal French society symbolizes a threat to the continuation of the human species, and especially if this society continues to break up, fragment, atomize into discretely contained individuals. The computation of his parts leads François back toward the whole. Or does it? Houellebecq's writing is also laced with ambiguity and satire, and he retracts his viewpoints even as he asserts them, vacillating between irony and earnestness in an eternal return (Moore 47).

Though misanthropic and depressing, *Submission* also offers the speculative promise of resistance and redemption, if only conditionally. Decadence and decline do not have to be permanent because metaphysical mutation and conversion are always possible. I would argue that Houellebecq's obsession with metaphysical mutation and conversion are his way of acknowledging the totalizing power of animalistic human biology, while at the same time rejecting determinism and making a case for the importance of randomness and quantum uncertainty in accordance with modern computational concepts of the universe.

Metaphysical Mutation in the Form of Conversion

Throughout his books, Houellebecq returns time and again to literary metaphors for quantum physics as a way of explaining the futility of human existence and the ongoing processes of random change. I focus here, specifically, on the recurring theme of metaphysical mutations throughout his novels and how he relates these to quantum uncertainty, thereby rejecting determinism and reasserting the role of chance and randomness in a science-driven world. In his novel *The Elementary Particles*, Houellebecq defines metaphysical mutations as "radical, global transformations in the values to which a majority subscribe," and he emphasizes that these are important and also rare occurrences, stating that "the values to which a majority subscribes at any given time determine society's economic and political structures and social mores" (3).

The core premise of *Submission* revolves around a metaphysical mutation, or fundamental shift, in modern French society. Houellebecq constructs a speculative situation in which the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate is elected president in 2022 and manages to form a coalition that leads to the upending of French secularism, a cornerstone of the French Republic, and the establishment of Sharia law. In *Submission*, François's conversion can be read as a form of speculative salvation in which he is saved from his entropic decline by a metaphysical mutation, or quantum uncertainty, so that he achieves a kind of equilibrium within the crisis of conscience that plagues human existence. This is in fact Vincenzo Pacillo's interpretation in his 2016 paper ("L'opportunità").

The metaphysical mutations in *Submission* mark a reversal in the cultural revolutions of late twentieth-century French society, which have generally led to the progressive liberalization of French political, cultural, and economic institutions. The establishment of Sharia law provides François with a kind of "salvation" by reestablishing his supremacy as an elite male within the social and sexual hierarchy, even as it spells exile and repression for the women and the Jewish characters in the novel. Seth Armus argues that *Submission* is primarily a work of cultural politics in which the author intentionally draws parallels with Vichy France and the Occupation, so that the novel is really a cautionary tale about the direction in which today's France could be heading (126).

The fact that the "metaphysical mutation" in *Submission* is anti-liberal is important because, as an aberration, it proves the existence of quantum uncertainty and makes a case against the entropic, uni-directional decomposition of French society into atomized individualistic parts. Indeed, in her analysis of post-Fordism in Houellebecq's novel *Whatever*, Carole Sweeney observes that this writer regards "significant periods of major historical change, particularly those involving rapid advances in the technologies of labor, as deleterious to a sense of social coherence, imagined or otherwise" (43). The implementation of Sharia law in *Submission* suggests, ironically to be sure, the possibility of a worldly salvation for François by promising him the sexual and gastronomical joys of bourgeois happiness and stability within a religious, communitarian social structure. For Houellebecq also makes it clear that François's happiness is built upon the repression of women and minorities, so that François's promise of utopia becomes part of a dystopian reality.

By imagining a speculative metaphysical mutation and then exploring its fictional consequences through literature, Houellebecq demonstrates the utility of fiction as a tool for invigorating democratic imaginations and surveying possible futures (Berg-Sørensen 133). In *Submission*, Houellebecq's narrative is rooted in the

speculative twist—a leap of faith or the tweaking of an independent variable?—that the Muslim Brotherhood becomes the dominant political party in France in 2022. The forward (or backward?) movement of the plot could be seen as the author’s portrayal of a generative, process-driven theory of existence based on quantum mechanics. This literary technique of introducing a fictional *novum* within a coherent system of facts is a defining characteristic of science fiction literature, as Darko Suvin outlines in his comprehensive 1979 work (*Metamorphoses*).⁶

Throughout *Submission* Houellebecq plays with this concept of a *novum*, or instance of radical exception, radical newness, by constantly posing the question as to whether instances of radical exception are possible, or whether all human behavior is governed by the deterministic yet random laws of quantum uncertainty. The establishment of Sharia law in near-future France is a metaphysical mutation on a societal level, and François’s conversion to Islam is such a mutation on an individual level. Are these instances proof of a rare harmonic wave that modifies human behavior, or are they rigorously predetermined? Houellebecq introduces these questions but without providing definitive answers, as his is a narrative of (or driven by) quantum uncertainty.

The Randomness of Computation: Ambiguity, Complexity, and Quantum Uncertainty in Houellebecq’s Fiction

François’s prospective happiness is conditional. Like the speculative premise of Houellebecq’s near-future novel, François’s conversion remains a kind of pseudo-utopian, pseudo-dystopian promise that is not fulfilled within the confines of the narrative. Seth Armus emphasizes that the last chapter, in which François converts, is set in the conditional tense, and therefore François’s conversion might not actually happen:

François wanders, experimenting, like Huysmans, with excesses (food, sex, and monasticism) until finally, in what I regard as a speculative, rather than factual, last chapter, he himself converts to Islam. I say speculative because of a dramatic shift in tense—all but unnoted in criticism. He narrates the final chapter, the one covering his conversion, entirely in the conditional. Since the narrator is constantly moving

⁶ Latin for “new thing,” “*novum*” is a term for the fictional scientific innovations that shape the narrative direction of works of science fiction.

between a familiar present (cast here as future) and an unreachable past (demonstrated by his attempt to mimic Huysmans), we can read this change as deliberate. For Agathe Novak-Lechevalier writing in *Libération*, it suggests a crucial ambiguity that characterizes the identities in flux throughout the novel—“a process of constant reversibility” (*un processus constant de réversibilité*). (137; emphasis in original)

Novak-Lechevalier also emphasizes the conditional tense of the final chapter in which François converts, noting that his conversion remains a tentative possibility rather than a reality, a last gasp of instability topping off a novel that is constantly assaulting the reader with the menace of incessant reversibility: “From its title therefore, to its final pages, the novel remains suspensive and unstable” (n. pag.).⁷ As the author of a linear narrative, Houellebecq by default has the power to lead his readers by the hand through a fictional universe, but it is a power that he abdicates by qualifying his extreme claims with a *laissez-faire* delivery, perfectly encapsulated in the English title of his first novel: *Whatever*. Houellebecq describes François’s conversion, the crucial resolution of the novel, as a blasé, foregone speculative conclusion from François’s point of view, almost like an afterthought: “A few more weeks would go by, like a sort of pretend waiting period, and in those weeks the weather would grow milder day by day, and it would be spring in Paris; and then, of course, I’d call Rediger” (*Submission* 243). Houellebecq thereby leaves the reader with the responsibility of deciding what the meaning of the novel finally is, the responsibility of distinguishing between polemic and satire, between utopia and dystopia.

The “crucial ambiguity” in Houellebecq’s writings is essential to understanding his views on free will and the computable randomness of his text. Although I read François’s conversion as a literary metaphor for the computational nature of the universe, the computational nature of François’s conversion does not mean that it is predetermined. Houellebecq’s use of satire and the capricious, patchwork-like construction of narrative in his novels serve as a literary metaphor for his belief in the random nature of the universe, which he attributes to quantum uncertainty. In her analysis of Houellebecq’s first novel, *Whatever*, Carole Sweeney observes that this author’s belief that we live in a futile, atomised universe is reflected in his “barely-can-be-bothered narrative” that lacks the cohesion of traditional storytelling: “A prototypical version of his later works, part-essay, part-satire, arguably by most principles of literary convention, *Whatever* barely qualifies as a novel at all” (42-43).

⁷ “De son titre, donc, à ses dernières pages, le roman restera suspensif et instable” (n. pag.).

This uncertainty and ambiguity is present in all of Houellebecq's novels, but he states it directly in the following scene from *The Elementary Particles*:

Annabelle knew that she could ring the doorbell and see Michel, but she could also do nothing. She did not know that these ten minutes were a concrete example of *free will*; she knew only that they were terrible and that when they had elapsed, she would never be quite the same again. Many years later Michel proposed a theory of human freedom using the flow of superfluid helium as an analogy. In principle, the transfer of electrons between neurons and synapses in the brain—as discrete atomic phenomena—is governed by quantum uncertainty. The sheer number of neurons, however, statistically cancels out elementary differences, ensuring that human behavior is as rigorously determined—in broad terms and in the smallest detail—as any other natural system. However, in rare cases—Christians refer to them as *acts of grace*—a different harmonic wave form causes changes in the brain which modify behavior, temporarily or permanently. It is this new harmonic resonance which gives rise to what is commonly called *free will*. (77; emphasis in original)

Houellebecq's *Submission* is devoted to a study of this interaction between determinism and these rare acts of free will, both of which he traces back to the laws of quantum mechanics. By asserting that quantum uncertainty is a governing structure that his human characters operationalize in their attempts to exercise free will, the novelist both acknowledges the computability of his narratives and allows for complexity and randomness. In Houellebecq's literary universe, computability and randomness do not stand in opposition: they are inextricably intertwined in the same system, as we with François's road to conversion in *Submission*. Quantum physics acts as a metaphorical blueprint, and/or a narrative sleight-of-hand, by means of which Houellebecq analyzes and rationalizes the absurdity of the modern human experience (Caracciolo 489).

Given François's apparent helplessness in the face of his bodily desires and his search for comfort, we as readers have to ask whether there was ever a plausible alternative ending to the novel? That is to say, is the programmability of François's conversion equivalent to predetermination? Could François have resisted the pressures to convert, or chosen Catholicism instead, like his intellectual kindred spirit Huysmans? In *Submission*, Houellebecq contrasts the linear nature of the novel as a medium with the seeming arbitrariness and meaninglessness in the construction of its plot. Major

narrative points appear to cascade randomly beginning from the introduction, colliding with minor events and thereby altering subsequent events in a spidery, irreversible chain reaction of literary world-construction. In this way Houellebecq's writing has an algorithmic, generative quality which is partly contrasted with the inherent linearity of literary fiction.

The question of randomness and predetermination is one that Houellebecq clearly addresses in this text and in his other writings. In another work of fiction, *Elementary Particles*, he provides the following straightforward commentary on the subject: "Water follows the path of least resistance. Human behavior is predetermined in principle in almost all of its actions and offers few choices, of which fewer still are taken" (70). Houellebecq's fundamentally molecular view of life, though computable, is also inherently random. While he embraces the logical extension of the "computational universe" into theories of technological determinism, I would argue that in *Submission* he leaves open the possibility of alternative endings. Houellebecq—in a certain sense playing God—deliberately plays with his authorial power, sometimes introducing major plot twists in a seemingly random or capricious fashion, one that may give the reader a sense of blasé uncertainty.

In *Submission*, Houellebecq sets up three possible plot directions before François's conversion, the latter coming at a point when his life might have taken a different course and he might have found happiness and meaning in his life in a different way. The first possible course is sexual, the second religious, the third intellectual. The first encounter involves François's relationship with Myriam, one of his former students. She is young, vivacious, and gives François the most intense sexual pleasure, but their relationship disintegrates before Myriam is forced to leave France with her family because they no longer feel safe living as Jews under a Muslim political regime. In the scene that marks the coming-of-the-end for Myriam and François's relationship, Houellebecq makes it clear that this is a pivotal moment for François, one at which he may see his future diverging down two possible paths. Myriam has come over to his apartment and they have ordered takeout from Rapid Sushi, but the evening goes south from there as narrated from François's point of view:

I didn't even want to fuck her, or maybe I kind of wanted to fuck her but I also kind of wanted to die, I couldn't really tell. I felt a slight wave of nausea. Where the fuck was Rapid Sushi, anyway? I should have asked her to suck me off, right then. Then we might have stood a chance, but I let the darkness settle and thicken, second by second.

“Maybe I should go,” she said after a silence of at least three minutes. Nick Drake had just ended his lamentations. We were about to hear the belchings of Nirvana. I turned it off and said, “If you like.”

...

The sushi showed up a few minutes after she left. We’d over-ordered. (30; ellipsis in original)

This scene is painfully laced with ambiguity and uncertainty. Houellebecq is playing with his authorial power, as though rolling the dice. François and Myriam might have had sex, Myriam might have stayed, the sushi might have come, their relationship might not have ended, and François might have found romantic and sexual satisfaction. Houellebecq makes it clear that any of these were possible alternative endings, but like elementary particles colliding randomly, the small events did not add up in a way that could generate a happy ending for François and Myriam.

The second point at which François’s path clearly might have gone in a different direction comes during his journey to Rocamadour, where he has an ambiguous brush with heartfelt religious conversion. At the foot of the Black Virgin at Rocamadour, François is overcome by the beginnings of spiritual feelings that seem to be precipitating a conversion to Catholicism, before they dissipate with his (or with the author’s) observation that “maybe [he] was just hungry. [He]’d forgotten to eat the day before, and possibly what [he] should do was go back to [his] hotel and sit down to a few duck’s legs instead of falling down between the pews in an attack of mystical hypoglycemia” (136). Houellebecq’s use of the conditional tense with words like “should have,” “might,” and “maybe” suggests that there were other directions, alternative directions in which the plot could have gone.

The third plot point is one at which François’s life does go in a successful direction: he achieves success in his professional academic career by writing a groundbreaking piece about Huysmans’s literary works. The scene in which François is struck with intellectual inspiration is one of the few in the novel in which his life seems to clearly be flowing in a positive direction:

I was sitting in a restaurant in the rue de la Montagne-aux-Herbes-Potagères, trying to decide between a chicken *waterzooi* and an *anguille au vert*, when all at once I was gripped by the certainty that I understood Huysmans completely, better than he understood himself, and that I was finally able to write my preface. (229; emphasis in original)

Once François grasps the core idea of what he wants to write about Huysmans, it is as though he has unlocked a code, or a magical door, and now his writing will readily flow forth. Of course, it may seem predictable—given the background and profession of the author—that the one part of his life François is able to control is the academic part, the scholarly part. His ability to create meaning through words gives him a clear sense of self-determination and satisfaction.

I would maintain that Houellebecq's playful, capricious plot twists at crucial points in the novel express his belief in the inherent randomness of the universe. The conditional language makes it seem like things could have gone one way but instead they went another, and not necessarily for any logical reason. The author always leaves the door open to potential alternatives before swinging it shut, thereby suggesting the merciless randomness of life, of a life determined by scientific principles, a life without any underlying metaphysics, any principles of religion or spiritual beliefs. In the past Houellebecq himself has said that he does not believe God exists, that he has searched for certainty in science, and that "the universe is nothing but a furtive arrangement of elementary particles" (*H. P. Lovecraft* 17-18). Yet, despite this author's provocative claim that his fiction is "neutral" thanks to his commitment to portraying objective truths (Smeets 108), we can also see him using reading, writing, and fiction as a tool for resistance, subversion, and self-determination over the totalizing regime of a computational universe.

Writing as Self-Determination in a Universe of Randomness

Houellebecq's fiction offers us a poetic response to the scientific and philosophical crises presented by the question of human consciousness and free will in the face of quantum mechanics. For Houellebecq, a defining feature of contemporary society is the atomization and futility of human existence from the perspective of quantum mechanics, our turn toward computation, and our cultural individualization. This same fragmentation and nihilism can be found in the structure and content of his novels as his protagonists succumb to the atomizing forces of modern existence. At the end of *Whatever*, the best Houellebecq's narrator can expect is to become "an item in a file," compressed and only explicable "between the pages": "his reduction or transformation to a text, to an entry in a textbook of psychiatry brings him solace; he has become information himself" (Sweeney 54). In *Platform*, the author presents leisure time as an atomized product, catalogued and indexed by serial numbers (Buchweitz and Cohen-Gewerc 4). In an analysis of *The Possibility of An Island*, Amaury Dehoux notes the technological nature of Houellebecq's writing in his

attempt to parse the dialectic of the human and the post-human: “Houellebecq’s novel presents itself therefore like the design of a new ontology, which could be called technological and which explores, in a speculative anthropology, the links between humanity and the technosciences” (653-54).⁸

And yet, writing and reading bring Houellebecq’s characters the hope of succor (Sweeney 48). Through his writings we may still find Houellebecq’s “rendering of experience, however banal, intelligible” (Sweeney 54). In an indifferent world, literature is Houellebecq’s tool of salvation and resistance:

In the face of an indifferent world, literature, to which the novel devotes superb (although funereal) praise, is in reality the only thing that maintains the saving distance: to maintain the ambiguity of words; to recall in the present the existence of a faraway past; to preserve the gap, and therefore the possibility of a dialogue, between two friendly consciousnesses, but which nothing can be made to fuse to the point of indistinction. (Novak-Lechevalier n. pag.)⁹

Houellebecq’s fiction, despite being ambivalent and satirical, creates meaning and value through its thoughtful construction and exploration of the philosophical question of what it means to be human. His despair at the insuperability of science makes his choice to render this despair through literature all the more remarkable. Delphine Grass contends that “the epistemological value of Houellebecq’s fiction lies in the poetic treatment of its subject which, by taking wandering detours in non-human creatures, creates autonomous platforms for ideological and cultural observation of our techno-scientific dreams and nightmares” (127). Houellebecq turns to literature as a response to the existentialism he finds in his confrontation with the essential physicalism and randomness of a world governed by the quantum uncertainty of colliding elementary particles. His poetic metaphors and similes for physical phenomena create a more harmonious relationship between consciousness and the physical world through the

⁸ “Le roman de Houellebecq se donne alors comme le dessin d’une nouvelle ontologie, qui pourrait être dite technologique et qui explore, en une anthropologie speculative, les liens entre l’humanité et les technosciences” (“De l’humain, du posthumain” 653-54).

⁹ “Dans l’indifférence du monde, la littérature, dont le roman fait un superbe éloge (quoique funèbre), est en réalité la seule à maintenir une distance salvatrice: à entretenir l’ambiguïté des mots; à rappeler dans le présent l’existence d’un passé lointain à préserver l’écart, et donc le dialogue possible, entre deux consciences amies, mais que rien ne saurait faire indistinctement fusionner” (Novak-Lechevalier n. pag.).

transcendent imaginative and emotional power of literature (Caracciolo 488). In her comparison of the Darwinian behavior of humans and animals in Houellebecq's literature, Stéphanie Posthumus suggests that the overarching thesis of Houellebecq's novels is that the essence of being human, what differentiates us from other biological beings, is the power to recount stories (375).

Against the backdrop of humankind's helplessness in a universe of computable randomness, the process of writing emerges as a means of self-determination. Houellebecq has repeatedly described reading and writing as means of escape, as "a permanent recourse to life" (*H. P. Lovecraft* 119). In accordance with his experience as a software administrator, he treats both his own writing process and the role of writing in *Submission* as a programmable, generative process. *Submission* flows forth from a speculative hypothesis, a what-if scenario: the National Front and Muslim Brotherhood become the two dominant political parties in France. In an interview with *The Guardian's* Angelique Chrisafis, Houellebecq said: "one very important condition of writing a novel is not to try to understand everything . . . It's best to observe the facts without necessarily having a theory" (qtd. in Chrisafis; ellipsis added). Although Houellebecq is a human author who comes up with the ideas that populate his fiction himself, he presents his writing process as the logical extension of facts as they interact with his conception of the universal truths that govern humanity.

François also uses the processes of both reading and writing as means for mediating his experience of reality in *Submission*. A core plot device in *Submission* is François's interactions with the life and writings of Huysmans. Houellebecq establishes on the first few pages of his novel that François's favorite author is Huysmans, and the trajectory of François's life is throughout the novel inextricably tied to that of Huysmans. This is another generative seed that Houellebecq plants and then allows to grow in his execution of the narrative. In his *Paris Review* interview, Houellebecq explains that when he writes fiction, the characters develop themselves, and one of the few things an author can do to determine the direction of a character's development is to decide on this character's literary taste ("The Art" n. pag.). François's writing process seems to channel that of Houellebecq. His introduction to the *Huysmans Pléiade* stems from his moment of inspiration, the moment when he saw that Huysmans was searching for bourgeois happiness. From this spark of an idea the rest of his writing flowed forth.

Houellebecq's own comments on his work and his process of writing provide some insight as to his views on universal truth and the role that his speculative writings play in relation to truth and knowledge creation. In an interview for the *Paris Review* in 2010 the author explains that he is attracted to science fiction because "I think

sometimes I need a break from reality” (n. pag.). Houellebecq distinguishes science fiction as the literary genre that is the most conducive to providing breaks from reality, purportedly because it is predicated on the introduction of a *novum* that intentionally bends the rules of reality as they currently stand. In another interview with *The Guardian*, Houellebecq has portrayed the escapist aspect of imaginary fiction as having real-world consequences, saying “I don’t think life is the real influence, it’s much more imaginative life” (qtd. in Jaggi). His concept of literature as something that has an influence on people through its embodied reading and writing is an allusion to the generative, immersive, operational power of literary narratives.

His portrayal of humankind as biologically-driven, comfort-seeking organisms whose actions constantly seek pleasure and try to avoid pain, seems soulless, scientific, and compulsive. Here Houellebecq puts forward the process of writing as an intervention, one through which we may intentionally sow the seeds of an idea and watch it grow according to rules of our own creation. It is his only answer to the depressing picture he paints of a universe randomly ordered by the rules of science, a place where people are stranded by our programmed instincts.

Man’s Carnal Appetite for Bourgeois Happiness

Let us move now to the primary site on which Houellebecq executes his program of conversion: the biology of his male characters. François’s conversion is not so much a spiritual conversion as the logical extension of his biological and psychological desires, raising the question of whether or not his conversion is predetermined by his biological composition and the societal superstructure in which he operates. Houellebecq’s rich sensory descriptions of François’s experience both contrast with his abstract human-particle analogies (Caracciolo 492) and create a textual experience through which the reader can analyze those discrete biological experiences that lead François to his individual metaphysical mutation: religious conversion. By the time he converts we are not surprised because we have followed the minor mutations that preceded this event (*The Elementary* 149). Furthermore, in the absence of true religious belief, François’s conversion can be read as a pure animalistic survival instinct, as this is all that remains to him in the wake of his country’s existential political crisis (Berg-Sørensen 141). We experience François’s conversion through the running of two of his biological “programs”: his digestion and his sexuality. As Regenia Gagnier notes, François “understands himself, and men in general, as Pavlovian” (423). François describes his sexual desires as being logically generated based on standard stimuli:

Subject man to erotic stimuli, even in their most standardized form—something as simple as low necklines and short skirts (or in the apt Spanish phrase, *tetas y culo*)—and he will feel sexual desire. Remove said stimuli and the desire will go away, and in a matter of months or even weeks he won't even remember his sexuality. (*Submission* 229)

The state secularism (*laïcité*) of modern-day France in Houellebecq's speculative account declines along with the quality of François's bourgeois lifestyle, as epitomized by his spiritual, gastronomical, sexual and bodily decline. Descriptions of food permeate the novel, repeatedly setting the tone and thereby suggesting whether a situation will be optimal or unfortunate, and François's reliance on take-out food and microwave dinners are markers of his sorry bachelorhood.¹⁰ During the violent riots accompanying the regime change, the coming-to-power of the Muslim Brotherhood, François is mainly concerned with the fact that he is hungry, so he goes to the store to buy some microwave dinners: "I felt like buying things to eat, *blanquette de veau*, pollock with chervil, Berber-style moussaka. . . . Back at home I heated up some beef tongue in a Madeira reduction—rubbery, but edible—and turned on the TV. The fighting had begun" (96-97). François's dysfunctional microwave is merely another one of a "series of petty annoyances—clogged sink, slow Wi-Fi, points on my license, dishonest cleaning woman, mistakes in my tax return—" (79) that plague him, disrupting his life's work as an academic and filling his immediate future with drudgery.

Houellebecq uses his detailed descriptions of preparing food as the groundwork for François's subsequent conversion by making it clear that François will not be engaging in a struggle of mental conscience versus creature comfort, since this mind-body divide is a false dichotomy in Houellebecq's fundamentally materialist view of the world. As his biological programs run, so François will make his life decisions. The extreme materialism of his situation can only be offset by religious belief or the soothing comforts of bourgeois happiness. But, unfortunately for François, he has neither religion nor bourgeois comforts. Yet Houellebecq deviously dangles the promise of bourgeois decadence in front of François as the reward waiting for him on the other side of his conversion to Islam, leaving François no viable option other than to submit.

¹⁰ For the central role that food plays in Houellebecq's novels, see Quaranta.

Before his ultimate conversion to Islam, François's first move in the direction of religious conversion occurs when he follows in the footsteps of J.-K. Huysmans, literally, and goes on a pilgrimage to the monastery of Rocamadour, where Huysmans underwent his own religious conversion to Catholicism and retired to a monastery. François discovers that he can understand the appeal of monastic life precisely as an escape from the drudgery of daily life and the bodily discomforts of a single middle-aged man (*Submission* 79), although he departs with Huysmans when it comes to the latter's disdain for carnal passions:

Generally speaking, my body was the seat of various painful afflictions—headaches, rashes, toothaches, hemorrhoids—that followed one after another, without interruption, and almost never left me in peace—and I was only forty-four! What would it be like when I was fifty, sixty, older? I'd be no more than a jumble of organs in slow decomposition, my life an unending torment, grim, joyless, and mean. When you got right down to it, my dick was the one organ that hadn't presented itself to my consciousness through pain, only through pleasure. (78)

François's confrontation with the materiality of his body and of daily life as sites of annoyance, aggravation, discomfort and pain remind us of Houellebecq's horror at the thought of a human life that is bereft of metaphysical consolations, at the mercy of computational principles, doomed to a slow and painful process of entropic decay (Betty, *Without* 4). Houellebecq as we know sees the universe as being fundamentally subject to the laws of science, without metaphysical or religious consolation, and so while he may be able to escape through fiction, he has François consider escaping to a monastery and later, perhaps—though this case is more complicated—through his conversion to Islam. In François's first near-conversion moment, when he almost rediscovers Catholic faith at the foot of the Black Madonna of Rocamadour, like J.-K. Huysmans, his nascent spiritual visions are quickly aborted with the thought: "Or maybe I was just hungry" (136). After half an hour of sitting in the pew in front of the Madonna, François gets up, "fully deserted by the Spirit, reduced to my damaged, perishable body" (137).

It seems that François cannot escape the dialectic of a banal materialist existence versus the lavish comfort of bourgeois happiness, in which subservient women would satiate all of his carnal passions. Indeed, he comes closer to the promise of bourgeois happiness through the writings of Huysmans. By reading Huysmans and reenacting the latter's physical journey to the monastery at Rocamadour, François transcends the

barriers of space and time and has an epiphany, a supposed moment of insight into the mind of Huysmans that may seem to suggest telepathy. This moment of insight is a testament on the part of Houellebecq to the power of a novel to open our minds, to give us knowledge (Hemer 30), although in this case the path to knowledge is facilitated by François's physical repetition of Huysmans's journey. François's flash of understanding lets him inhabit Huysmans, becoming so immersed in the latter's psyche that François is able to write his finest piece yet on J.-K. Huysmans. Here his flash of intuition leads him to the conclusion that:

Huysmans's true subject had been bourgeois happiness, a happiness painfully out of reach for a bachelor, and not the happiness of the *haute bourgeoisie* (the cooking celebrated in *Là-bas* was instead what you might call good home cooking). . . . His idea of happiness was to have his artist friends over for a *pot-au-feu* with horseradish sauce, accompanied by an "honest" wine and followed by plum brandy and tobacco, with everyone sitting by the stove while the winter winds battered the towers of Saint-Sulpice. (231; first and third emphasis in original)

Thus, through Huysmans, François gains clarity on the alternative to his own entrapment within the duality of materialist horror and metaphysics: bourgeois happiness. Since there is no higher world than the world of the flesh for François, he sees a way toward happiness in the indulgence of his carnal passions which, as he notes in the case of Huysmans, are dependent on the labor of subservient women.

François is ultimately drawn to convert to Islam under the proselytizing influence of Roger Rediger, the new president of the University of Sorbonne and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, who tries to lure him back to academia under the condition that he convert. François is persuaded after reading Rediger's book, *Ten Questions About Islam*, and visiting Rediger's apartment for a lavish meal. In both cases he is most struck by Rediger's acceptance and practice of polygamy, which seems to bring Rediger the bourgeois happiness that François covets. François pays keen attention to the deliciousness of the canapés, baklava, and briouats prepared by Rediger's plump 40-year-old wife, and to the youthful attractions of the latter's teenage wife, caught running around the house in low-cut jeans and a Hello Kitty T-shirt. François is impressed by the way Rediger is living, with "a forty-year-old wife to do the cooking, a fifteen-year-old wife for whatever else . . ." (213). Given the conditions of his own biological and psychological state of affairs, as laid out by

Houellebecq, François's ultimate conversion plays out like the execution of a pre-designed computer program in accordance with Houellebecq's fundamental computational view of the universe.

Women as Laborers for Digestion and Procreation

The satiation of François's carnal satisfactions is significantly and problematically displaced onto the bodies of women in a gross display of literary misogyny. François sees in Rediger's multiple wives the embodiment of the ideal romantic setup for a writer, one which Huysmans searched for in vain, according to François: "he wanted a good little cook who could turn herself into a whore, and he wanted it on a fixed schedule" (77). François thus holds up these two incredibly reductive models of womanhood, the good little cook and the whore—the one capable of attending to his culinary needs and the other capable of satiating his sexual desires—as perhaps mutually exclusive roles that women must play, must perform if men are to reach their desired state of bourgeois happiness. The main justification that Houellebecq gives in defense of this cooption of female labor for the service of men is this: in twenty-first-century Europe, following as it does and even further improving on the old Enlightenment ideals, women are already expected to play both of these roles, in addition to pursuing their own careers. Houellebecq of course portrays this as an impossible expectation resulting inevitably in dissatisfaction, both for the women and for their male partners.

The crisis of the Western woman is personified in the character of Annelise, the career woman whose dinner party is a failure because her food is a disaster, and who is too caught up in a cycle of exhaustion to sexually satisfy her husband or enjoy her life, thus being left to glare at the tabbouleh and succumb to the sagging flesh of middle age. Once again blurring the lines between fiction and reality, predetermined futures and fickle outcomes, Houellebecq describes Annelise's crisis through the wanderings of François's imagination, now set forth in the conditional tense:

As she sank down into her sofa, glaring at the tabbouleh, I thought about Annelise's life—and the life of every Western woman. In the morning she probably blow-dried her hair, then she thought about what to wear, as befitted her professional status, whether "stylish" or "sexy," more likely "stylish" in her case. Either way, it was a complex calculation, and it must have taken her a while to get ready before dropping the kids off at day care, then she spent the day e-mailing, on the phone, in various

meetings, and once she got home, around nine, exhausted (Bruno was the one who picked the kids up, who made them dinner—he had the hours of a civil servant), she'd collapse, get into a sweatshirt and yoga pants, and that's how she'd greet her lord and master, and some part of him must have known—had to have known—that he was fucked, and some part of her must have known that she was fucked, and that things wouldn't get better over the years. The children would get bigger, the demands at work would increase, as if automatically, not to mention the sagging of the flesh. (73-74)

François's only romantic relationship, apart from mildly successful romps with prostitutes and a couple of failed relationships with former students, is with a young student of his named Myriam. Myriam, whose youth and virility stand in stark contrast to François's depressiveness and lethargy, ultimately exercises that freedom of mobility granted to Western women and moves on from a relationship that Houellebecq openly portrays as having nothing to give her, first leaving François's apartment before the sushi arrives (30), and ultimately leaving France with her family and finding a new man in Israel. The way Houellebecq constructs his speculative scenario in *Submission* allows at least for women in submissive, polyamorous marriages to be able to divide the labor as they feed and pleasure their male partners, at the same time avoiding the drudgery of life as a productive worker in neoliberal economies.

By rooting the basis of François's conversion to Islam in his carnal desires for good food and good sex, desires to be carried out through the labor of women, Houellebecq further explores the role of the body as a site for material processing through the digestion of matter and the procreation of matter, the two biological functions of human beings that most resemble the functioning of software code. This supports my belief that Houellebecq fundamentally believes in the computability of the universe, in accordance with the laws of science (including quantum physics) and technology. In Houellebecq's fictional version of France under Islamic law, the carnal comforts of men are delivered via the labor of a team of subservient wives. While Houellebecq portrays gender inequality as something that could be beneficial to women by providing them with the material comforts and protection of older, richer, more powerful husbands, as well as with the female companionship of their sister wives, this may also be an apt commentary on the role of women as silent laborers in the history of computing, as Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has documented (*Programmed* 30).

Conclusion: Speculative Fiction as a Way to the Truth?

The processes of converting from one way of thinking to another, either on a personal or a society-wide scale, remain largely mysterious, yet the results are powerful. Houellebecq frames the process of conversion as one that is made up of modular logical pieces that are fundamentally driven by the laws of biology, physics, and chemistry, like elementary particles or short computer programs that generate complex and random fluctuations in the trajectory of existence. His emphasis on the material basis for human actions within the vacuum of metaphysical structures makes a case for the theory of the computational universe, while also acknowledging that the universe is governed by a law of complexity that does not allow for much logical or algorithmic control, on the part of either humans or machines.

There is a danger, however, in Houellebecq's fetishistic treatment of the transcendent power of science and universal truths. He depicts himself as an author who discovers and shares universal truths through his writings, thereby tapping into the promises of freedom and control offered by the power of computer programming (Chun, "On 'Sourcery'" 311-12). Houellebecq has asserted that one of his defining characteristics, as a thinker and as a writer, is his belief in truth and reality. He describes himself as "a realist who exaggerates a little" and he admits that he is "a curmudgeonly pain in the ass because [he] refuse[s] to diverge from the scientific method or to believe there is a truth beyond science" ("The Art" n. pag.). In the same interview, Houellebecq states that one of the three main appeals of his fiction is that "you sense obscurely that it's the truth" (n. pag.). In these statements he makes a strong case for the existence of abstract, universal truths based on science, and he claims to write in a manner similar to the scientific method, by altering independent variables and seeing how they interact with "the facts" rather than constructing a plot. Leaving room for the possibility that Houellebecq's answers are exaggerated or satirical, he recurrently returns to the message that his dedication to truth, reality, and science are his defining characteristics as an artist and a thinker.

Speculative fictions shape the future as they weave into the imaginaries and enactments of future presents (Dourish and Bell). While I interpret Houellebecq's lackadaisical treatment of religious conversion as evidence that he is using fiction, and particularly speculative fiction, as a playground for prototyping alternative or potential futures, his portrayal of a society ruled by Islamic law with a happily submissive class of women in polygamous marriages is clearly subjective and should not be mistaken as a logical extension of the current state of affairs. It is precisely the recognition that fictions have agency that should lead us to reject the idea that *Submission* is somehow

an accurate portrayal of the world we live in or the future to come. Despite Houellebecq's belief in the transcendent powers of Lovecraft's materialism, this author's gritty materialism does not lessen the subjective nature of his truth claims or his role as a popular author who has a clear voice in the public discourse. Houellebecq's speculative version of near-future France seems ultimately much more like a projection of his own struggles with metaphysical and existential questions than a true harbinger of Europe's future, in spite of his novel's symbolic role in subsequent geopolitical conflicts.

In an eerie turn of events, *Submission* was published in France on January 7, 2015, the same day as the Charlie Hebdo shooting in which Islamist terrorists killed 12 people in the magazine's Paris offices. The issue of Charlie Hebdo that was published just before the massacre featured a full-cover satiric cartoon of Michel Houellebecq under the headline, "The Predictions of Wizard Houellebecq." With fatwas being issued on authors' heads and Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign with its platform that would ban Muslims from entering the United States, *Submission* provides ample fodder for the porous borders between fact and fiction. It also invites us to seriously consider the questions that Houellebecq raises about the processes of quantum-physical and metaphysical mutations, and the ways in which people can intervene within systems of political, scientific, and technological control.

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