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Prophecies of Civilizational Collapse 2.0: Michel Houellebecq's *Submission*

Each epoch has its “end of the world” literature. What makes ours different is that this kind of literature is not marginal but almost commands the center of attention. A century ago, disintegration of the West was famously predicted by Oswald Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (*The Decline of the West*) (1922). Spengler did not maintain that the catastrophe would happen suddenly: he suggested that the death throes would last two hundred years. He was a determinist, and his view of history was influenced by the anti-Thomistic German philosophers of the nineteenth century. Nor did he blame humanity for what he considered to be an inevitable unfolding of the human chronicle. A general idea that seems to have guided him was that civilizations come and go, and western civilization is no exception.

A somewhat different variety of self-annihilating predictions can be found in the fictional dystopias written at approximately the same time. The most famous ones: George Orwell's *1984* (1949) and Evgenii Zamiatin's *My (We)* (1921). Zamiatin conjures up a vision of humanity living a Gulag-like existence, the result of a series of events discreetly toned down by the authors. The twentieth century has also left us a legacy of pessimistic narratives about individuals without a sense of purpose who, like Franz Kafka's heroes, either feel lost in an unjust world or, like Albert Camus' nameless killer in *L'Etranger* (*The Stranger*) (1942), seem to have lost their sense of belonging to the human community.

They use their loneliness in destructive and senseless ways. While texts of that kind concentrate on the catastrophes befalling individual characters, they do imply that societies that breed defeatist attitudes are themselves ill and heading for self-annihilation.

While statistics are not my specialty, I venture to say that the twentieth century produced a larger number of pessimistic texts about human existence than centuries past, even when one takes into account the limitations of illiteracy and poverty common in Europe until a few generations ago. Therefore, it may have seemed that little else remained to be said on the subject of human defeat—until Houellebecq stepped in and illuminated the issue from yet another angle.

Michel Houellebecq's *Soumission* (*Submission*, 2015) does not fit in the cortège of Spengler's followers. Nor can it be taxonomized as a dystopia. While the novel was published a hundred years after Spengler's work and seems to confirm his prediction, Spengler is not a predecessor of the novel's pessimistic vision. Houellebecq stands far away from German fantasies, he rather looks at the here-and-now and draws rational conclusions. Critics point to his affinity with Joris-Karl Huysmans, but nineteenth-century decadence is not what the main hero represents either (Gagnier). Houellebecq is not a determinist: *Submission* does not suggest that it is inevitable that civilizations be born and then wither. Rather, the book suggests that the European community passively opened itself to such a degree that it allowed its center, its heart to flow out and away. The absence of the center is the hub of the novel: while Myriam escapes its devastating influence, the main hero, François, remains in the destructive space created by its absence.

Houellebecq narrates a fragment of life of a certain François, a successful university professor in his forties, unattached, living alone and gently bored with life. What keeps him going is the presence in his life of physical pleasures such as sex (detailed descriptions of sexual activities at the beginning of the novel are presumably meant to hold the reader's attention at the ready), food and drink (the narrator lingers over the hot pasties served at Dr. Rediger's house, and the apple tarte crowning an excellent dinner at the Tanneurs), and occasional intellectual and aesthetic gratification such as the one received by reading the works of Joris-Karl Huysmans. The time frame of the narrative is worth noting: we start with the present tense somewhere around 2015 (the hero's monologue describing his life in the second decade of the twenty-first century), and end with future tense in which François submits himself to the Muslim masters. The novel was published in 2015, while the envisaged future happened in 2022–2023. Like Orwell's *1984* or Andrei Amalrik's *Просуществовать ли Советский Союз до 1984 года?* (*Will the Soviet Union Survive until 1984?*) (1969). Houellebecq

boldly enters the future and treats it as a logical outcome of what has been going on in the present. 'A' and 'b' have been said, and they inevitably lead to 'z.' The French elect a Muslim government in a free and democratic election.

The hero is at the end of his tether, but he does not accuse society, the capitalist system, or a system of beliefs. He does not have any idea how to make life more pleasurable for himself and is not interested in entering a dialogue with anyone (he passively listens to what Rediger has to say). He is a beneficiary of all that modern society can offer—but all he feels is acute *ennui*. As for suicide, he is too selfish and too passive to take such a decisive step. Nor does he have any interest in working for the betterment of society. He is like a fish in a bowl, willing for someone to pour the content of the bowl into a larger and more interesting bowl. He won't make an effort to facilitate the procedure, but he will not resist either.

In Kafka, the centerpoint was a cry for help and understanding. François does not utter such cries. He lets the wave carry him on. At the end of the novel, he discovers that the wave is in fact a gentle variety of Islam flowing over France. Democratically, by vote. The Muslim Brotherhood Party comes to power legally, beating the National Front of Marine Le Pen and an array of other parties. The changes are minor at first: a large business meeting where the absence of women is discovered only after a while; a university lecture hall filled with male students (one occasionally sees girls with covered faces and heads, shy and submissive). In the university president's office, instead of portraits of politicians, framed quotations from the Quran. Yet the president has retained his habit of drinking expensive alcohols and does so openly: more than a suggestion that Islam accepts and promotes a hierarchical society.

Is there a way out? Those who interpret Houellebecq usually ignore the character that may be a symbol of such hope. François' relationship with Myriam plays a more profound role than the reviewers assign to it. The sexual scenes between the two obscure Myriam's significance. The reviewers apparently have felt that sex is a more important element of the hero's journey through life than his attempt to position himself *vis-à-vis* time, place, community, belief. They have ignored the fact that Myriam is the only character who resists the submission and who does not surrender.

At first, she does so reluctantly and as a favor to her parents who insist on moving to Israel because they fear the rising power of Muslims in France. Myriam does not want to go: her home is France, she is French and she wants to stay French. But she follows her parents to Israel where she feels alienated at first—or so her letters to François say. Gradually, the letters become less despairing and less frequent. The reader draws the proper conclusion: Myriam

found her place in Israel, she accepted—and adopted—its founding philosophy. That this philosophy has its roots in such concepts as soul or divinity is clear to the reader but not to the narrator. François simply lets go of the Myriam of his imagination. She is lost forever so far as he is concerned—and he does not belong to the people who mourn their losses or desire to possess what is beyond reach. He wants to live comfortably. Much as he is grieved by Myriam's disappearance, he comes to terms with it.

Myriam represents hope rejected by François. She chooses something greater than she – a community, a body of beliefs, a meaning. François' attempt to make such a choice is unsuccessful. It requires effort, while François is unwilling to exert himself. He sees Myriam only as a companion in his sexual adventures.

The ability to shake off an unsuccessful romance does not leave François satisfied, let alone happy. He acutely feels his loneliness, his lack of family and friends and lack of purpose in life. He sees these deficiencies not as something that can be eliminated by effort, but rather as obstacles to making his life pleasant and attractive. He greatly enjoys the fine cuisine which he samples during his visits to Allain Tanneur's and Robert Rediger's households. He would love to eat like that every day, but instead he subsists on ready-made meals that provide no pleasure. He does not search for a purpose in life, he merely would like to make life comfortable and happy, transform it into a chain of diverse pleasures to which he should be invited and among which he should be cherished.

His last attempt at seeking a perfectly pleasurable life takes him to a Catholic monastery in Ligugé which he once visited in his youth. The taxi driver tells him that this is the oldest Christian abbey in Western Europe and people from all over the world come here to visit—why, the previous week he drove Brad Pitt to this abbey. The monastery happens to be Catholic but it might as well be Buddhist, because in the perception of the narrator, its life is reduced to a few predictable rituals. The monk whom François encounters is friendly, he even remembers François' first visit twenty years prior; he offers him a room where François can find peace and quiet. Presumably, it was this kind of visit that made Huysmans return to the Catholic faith. But the visit does not answer François' question of why a number of men who could have chosen another way of life decided to live together in austere conditions and away from "the world." Spirituality never enters the scene. The mind-blowing idea of God and man's relation to him never occupies François for longer than a few seconds. He has been thoroughly secularized. He spends two days at Ligugé and then lies to the attending monk that urgent business calls him back to Paris. He departs. The monastery gave him less pleasure than the fine dinner at the Tanneurs.

The next step in François' boring life is a long conversation with his former (and future) boss Rediger. This conversation, or rather Rediger's monologue, persuades our hero to submit to the ritual of becoming a Muslim. The ritual is superficial and does not require physical or mental effort. Rediger tells François that unlike Christianity, Islam accepts the world as it is and this is a wise attitude. Wasting one's life on trying to change the world was Christianity's fatal mistake; this is why the Christian religion was defeated and passed away. The world is justly arranged: the strong and talented are rewarded while the weak fall by the wayside. Islam recognizes this. It accepts the world with all its imperfections, rather than trying to achieve something impossible to achieve. Christianity wasted a lot of human effort on building a world that cannot be built, because the world is as it is and its transformation is beyond human reach.

Rediger describes to François a future that requires no effort. The university position he had been obliged to give up would be again his. Financially, he would be comfortable 'til the end of his days. He would be entitled to at least two wives, as would any important person in society. These two imaginary wives – not yet visualized by François but somehow echoing Rediger's two wives (one of them a fifteen-year-old beauty, the other an excellent cook and home maker) may have played a decisive role in François' consent: he is persuaded to submit to the ritual.

Just as sex with Myriam played the role of bait in the first part of the novel where a Muslim takeover was not yet imminent, so does the "two wives" perspective attracts François in the second part. While there are no erotic scenes there, future physical pleasures are implied: the excellent paté-stuffed hors d'oeuvre prepared by the fortyish "first wife," and the perfection of the human body ready for male orders, exemplified by the clad-in-tight-jeans "second wife" whom François observes at Professor Rediger's home. Like Myriam, the two women seem to be marginal characters in the novel, but their parallel introduction, and François' longing for pleasure, suggest otherwise. Rediger tells him that unlike Christianity, Islam promises sexual fulfilment to everyone aspiring to be somebody. Islamic culture is created by males, and females are supposed to find fulfilment in serving the opposite sex. Rediger praises "women's elasticity" in playing their roles in society. It remains unclear what percentage of women would be content to be praised for this kind of elasticity. Rediger's persuasive monologues resemble conversations in Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* and Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, in that they are rhetorically perfect explanations of why a certain *Weltanschauung* should be adopted.

As is usually the case when unknown waters are being tried, François does not quite immerse himself in this new world, so temptingly shown him by

Professor Rediger. On the last pages of the novel and in order to affably introduce the reader to the inevitable future, Houellebecq shifts his narration to future tense. The ultimate surrender: the acceptance of a new position at the university and various other honors and pleasures are described as if they were a daydream. On his road to ultimate surrender François meets others who took the same route. What he learns, or rather jots down on the pages of his diary/confession, is that they too were rewarded with obedient and pleasing wives—or one wife, as in the case of Jean-François Loiseleur. The use of future tense suggests that Houellebecq is not entirely persuaded of that future; perhaps the climate of submission has not yet overtaken France to such an extent that all is lost.

The transition to Islam is gentle and almost invisible, and it shows that Islam is not only a religion. “Islam will become politics or it will die” this quote from Ayatollah Khomeini has been copied *verbatim* by Houellebecq. It suggests a reliance in Muslim societies on secularization of the elites. The Islamic God is beyond reach, and it is not necessary to try to enter into intimacy with him. In view of that, can we take seriously the author’s comment that *Submission* is a satire? Only in the sense that the readers of this novel are the very people who will make such a transition to a new political reality possible. Houellebecq shows a bit of *Schadenfreude* in his descriptions of Islam taking over France. Islam does not want to change the world; it accepts it as a creation of Allah. Unwillingness of the satisfied middle classes to exert themselves, as well as their secularization, are the reasons why Islam is destined to triumph over Christianity. At least in France. Houellebecq shows what may be the final end of society whose goal is to make life pleasant and easy for everyone, while removing transcendence from the thoughts of the elites and “the ten commandments of civilization” from the public square.

Reviewing the responses to this book, I noted that the commentators were trying to hold on to the story of François as if the book belonged to the genre of *Bildungsroman*. But the paucity of the plot made it difficult to do so, and some reviewers went off on tangents before finding something to say. In the *New York Times*, half of Karl Ove Knausgaard’s review is an aside, while a weak attempt to bite into the subject matter occurs after a page-and-a-half of digressions (Knausgaard). Paul Gottfried tries to hold on to the plot by dwelling on personal details of Houellebecq’s life and the sexual scenes which occur at the beginning of the novel, but there is hardly enough interesting material there (Gottfried). Betsy Reed in the *Guardian* points out that the novel was a bestseller in Germany and France—an issue that deserves a study of its own (Reed). I found Adam Leith Gollner’s review in *New Yorker* to contain more substance than those mentioned above (Gollner), for reasons indicated in

this paper's title. While I see substantial differences between Houellebecq and Huysmans, an invocation of the latter "tests out his conflicts in our day and age." The result seems to be that culture has lost its meaning and only pleasure counts. The novelty in *Submission* is François' discovery that pleasure too requires an effort. François is unwilling to put this into practice. Here resides the difference between Huysmans and Houellebecq.

After the outpouring of great novels in the nineteenth century and a somewhat smaller stream of great political novels in the twentieth, we have witnessed a generation or two of the "politically correct" novels à la Margaret Atwood: blaming the past and rehashing the rules of novel writing that emerged out of the "genius" epoch—Dostoevsky and Flaubert, Tolstoy and Balzac, Prus, Sienkiewicz and Sigrid Undset. The twentieth-century political novels have followed: Camus, Kafka, Solzhenitsyn, Pasternak. After that came novels that did not say anything new and might as well not have been written, even though their reviewers praised them highly and Nobel prizes were bestowed on some of them. In response, the reading public has shrunk.

Then came Houellebecq. He belongs to the writers who zero in on a lack of purpose in western Europeans—a topic routinely discussed in the English-speaking world. However, the chorus of praise for such writers has been restrained, the *NYT* and *NYRB* soon forgot to follow up and quote him in subsequent articles (a writer becomes truly famous only if positive reviews are followed up by frequent mentions of the writer's name in subsequent texts). This is an important indicator of editorial bias in the leading periodicals: they cannot deny praise to a really good book but then, instead of following up with further recognition, they discreetly remove that book from the field of vision.

Paradoxically, Houellebecq is a great storyteller: he squeezes the story out of an almost-dehydrated plot. The plot of this novel is barely there: a few months of a middle-aged man's life devoid of spectacular events. While reading *Submission*, I could not get rid of a thought that this novel has an unlikely parallel in Maurice Ravel's *Bolero*, an orchestral work that starts inconspicuously and ends with a fortissimo—except that in Houellebecq, it goes in the opposite direction. *Submission* begins with a description of a successful man living in Paris, teaching at a university and sleeping with his students. Then come this man's conversations with other intellectuals in Paris and elsewhere—the uncertainty increases—until the final part, in future tense, informs us of an unexpected solution. Instead of resonating like Ravel's *fortissimo*, the ending is a quiet surrender to *pianissimo*. François does not actually say that his conversion took place, he teases us with the future tense. But it is hard to avoid the impression that *Submission* is like *Bolero*, with a silencer plugged in at the

end, a *Bolero* deprived of the vigor and power of Ravel's composition, a *Bolero* upside down, a caricature of *Bolero*. Instead of ending with a triumphant call to joy and power, we are shown dissolution into nothingness. François is deprived of the desire to overcome that served Europeans so well over the centuries.

This novel could not have been written by a non-Germanic Central European. The folks in Central Europe are not yet ready to surrender. Milan Kundera's *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí* (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*) (Kundera 1995) is far from being as hopeless as Houellebecq. In Kundera there is a ray of hope; one can blame hopelessness on the political system. In Houellebecq, this justification disappears.

Critics have argued that Houellebecq belongs to the tradition initiated by Huysman's novel *À rebours* which presented a character similarly unable to cope with the duties of being human. That character, named Des Esseintes, was created by a writer who likewise was unable to put up with "the horrible reality of existence." The similarities seem superficial to me. François does not see reality as horrible. He is simply unwilling to make an effort to be part of the human community. Houellebecq suggests that our greatest enemy is laziness and unwillingness to make an effort. Mikhail Bulgakov famously wrote that cowardice is the greatest sin; Houellebecq replaces cowardice with indolence. Yes, the *ennui* which François experiences has significant ancestry in French and European literature: *ennui*, *Weltschmerz*, spleen, the young Werther and so on. However, one of the assumptions of those earlier narratives was that such psychological states were rare. In the twenty-first century, they are common—at least in Houellebecq's view.

What François lacks (and Houellebecq as well) is the humility that opens the gates of wisdom and freedom. Humans have a limited ability to understand their predicament, and this limitation makes it necessary to turn to the transcendent in search for help. This can be done only in profound diffidence. In Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady*, cz. III (*Forefathers' Eve*, part III), Father Peter says it well: "Lord, who am I before your countenance? A speck of dust, a cipher" ("Panie, czymże ja jestem przed Twoim obliczem / Prochem i niczem"). (Mickiewicz 150) The acknowledgment of one's limitations is a *sine qua non* of progress in reconciling oneself to the human condition and using one's freedom properly. François has emptied himself of this part of his personality.

Houellebecq is original in that he suggests that the cause of civilizational decline is indolence and vanity. It is not the same as the Romantic *Weltschmerz* or Kafka's despair at a lack of proper exit. It is not the same as Camus' meditation on why life seems meaningless. It is something much more down-to-earth and not at all ennobling: plain laziness and vanity that make us postpone important

yet unpleasant decisions. Until recently, Western intellectuals have been able to put up with the imagined causes of their failures: they were romantic and grandiose, as in Nietzsche. They were flattering. But indolence? Houellebecq shows no pity: “this is the way the world ends; not with a bang but a whimper” (Eliot 128).

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| Abstract

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The paper interprets a fictional biography of a French university professor bored with life. He tries the usual medicines: sex and other physical pleasures, debates with peers, and monastery solitude. No remedy seems to work. He fails to pay attention to one of his student lovers who chose commitment to a set of beliefs in Israel over pointless existence in Paris. The novel ends with political power in France passing on to the Muslim Brotherhood. The expected changes in social life follow. The professor allows himself to be carried on by the wave of decisions and beliefs provided by others. The paper argues that, in contrast to Mikhail Bulgakov's thesis that "cowardice is the greatest sin," Michel Houellebecq suggests that indolence is the source of our failures.

Keywords: Submission, Islam, sex, pleasure, indolence, Israel

| Bio

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