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Chapter 14

AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANA SHEETS: REALISM, NATURALISM, AND LICENTIOUS OBSCENITY—FRENCH AUTHORS ÉMILE ZOLA AND MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ

Keywords: doubling, Houellebecq, “J’accuse . . . !”, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, *Nana*, *Platform*, *Submission*, *The Elementary Particles*, *The Possibility of an Island*, *Thérèse Raquin*, Zola

MFS: Let’s begin by looking at naturalism and its most famous proponent, Émile Zola. Why was this literary movement so important?

DS: Naturalism grew out of literary realism, which emerged in the aftermath of the 1848 revolutionary upheavals in Europe. Realism depicted everyday life among ordinary people while consciously avoiding the overwrought and decadent associations with romanticism. Naturalism luridly exposed the underbelly of conventional mid-19th century society to reveal “the dregs of society” and “the degradations and degenerations of humans in bondage to a social and cosmic determinism” (Levine, 2000, p. 614).

Thus, as Berg and Martin note, “The doctrine of naturalism” becomes evident in Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin* (1867) and is fully developed in his 20-novel series *Les Rougon-Macquart* (1871-1893). Naturalism, they emphasize, is “an offshoot of realism” that rejects “the lyrical sentimentality and mystical or supernatural speculations of romanticism”. If realism depicts “contemporary . . . everyday . . . events” and features “the interaction of common, ordinary individuals from various social groups” within “the society in which they lived”, naturalism, by contrast, approaches its subjects “with pretensions of scientific rigor” that luridly expose the underbelly of conventional society, thereby shocking and titillating the middle class “bourgeois” reader (citations in Berg & Martin, 1992, p. 9).

Naturalism was influenced by the scientific theory advanced by Charles Darwin in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), which examined how natural selection determined the evolution of populations. For naturalist writers beginning with Zola, this meant stripping away the veneer of civilization to reveal our animalistic origins.

For Zola the pursuit of these “truths” could be seen as a direct extension of Enlightenment principles founded on rationality and scientific reason. In that sense he could be regarded as “a true heir of the *encyclopédistes* of the eighteenth century who had waged unremitting warfare against the Roman Catholic Church and had helped lay the ideological foundations of the French Revolution”. The difference, however, was that Zola’s focus was not on “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity”, but rather “Truth and Justice”. Indeed, the last two novels he sought to write were devoted to these themes. His book *Vérité* (*Truth*) was published following his death. However, *Justice*, intended as its sequel, was only in its very early stages of creation (citations in Hemmings, 1977, p. 11).

Zola saw his fiction as depicting “the vast democratic upheaval of our time”. Indeed, the Rougon-Macquart family characterized in his 20-novel series had peasant origins, their most successful members having managed to make their way into the ranks of the *haute bourgeoisie* (the upper middle class). “The work will constitute in this way”, emphasized Zola, “a study of the contemporary *bourgeoisie*” (Zola citations in Hemmings, 1977, p. 71).

MFS: How would you compare Émile Zola’s fiction to Alexandre Dumas or Victor Hugo?

DS: In response to your question about comparative literary influences, it’s not particularly helpful to associate Émile Zola (1840-1902) with Alexandre Dumas (1802-1870), who is best known for his adventure fiction—particularly *The Three Musketeers* (1844) and *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1845-1846). As for comparing Victor Hugo (1802-1885) with Zola, the literary styles of the two men are fundamentally at odds. While Zola may have been initially enthusiastic, suggested Hemmings, about “Hugo’s lyric and dramatic genius in his youth”, by the time Hugo returned from exile in 1870 after Napoleon III was ousted and the Third Republic proclaimed, Zola’s enthusiasm had waned. By then he “viewed Hugo as the sole surviving representative of that outdated literary movement [Romanticism]”, and, therefore, he felt that Hugo’s literary approach and towering success might impede the new direction of literature away from Romanticism toward realism and, ultimately, in the direction of naturalism (citations in Hemmings, 1977, p. 96).

Nor was Zola alone. Gustave Flaubert, Zola’s mentor and at one time an enthusiastic admirer of Hugo, was highly critical of *Les Misérables*: “I find neither truth nor greatness in this book” (Flaubert, 1982, p. 30). Indeed, by the early 1860s when it was published, French literature had already been moving decisively away from Romanticism toward “realism as a concept and a movement” increasingly identified with Balzac, Stendhal, and the Goncourt brothers (Roche, 2007, p. 56).

For this reason the precursor to Zola is rightfully Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850), the founder of literary realism, who influenced not only Zola but also Gustave Flaubert, Charles Dickens, Henry James, and many others. Balzac’s *The Human Comedy* is a series of interlinked stories with reoccurring characters that consists of 91 completed works covering the French historical period from 1815-1848. This period encompasses both the Restoration and the July Monarchy. Zola proclaimed his enthusiasm for Balzac in a letter written in 1867: “Have you read the whole of Balzac? What a man! I am re-reading him just now. He towers over everyone else in this century, Victor Hugo and the others” (Zola cited in Hemmings, 1977, p. 68).

If Balzac was to write the great interlinked series of realistic novels and stories depicting French society from 1815-1848, Zola was the pioneer of literary naturalism featuring 20-related novels situated in the Second French Empire (1852-1870). It should come as little surprise, therefore, that the *Rougon-Macquart* series in Zola's estimation represented his effort to "accomplish for the Second Empire, more methodically, what Balzac accomplished in respect of the reign of Louis-Philippe" (Zola cited in Hemmings, 1977, p. 71).

MFS: How would you apply the literary concept of doubling with respect to Émile Zola (1840-1902) and Michel Houellebecq (1956-)?

DS: Zola was an enormously successful novelist in his time just as Houellebecq is today. Both men's accomplishments were greatly abetted, apart from their obvious talent, by shocking the sensibilities of their audiences. In Zola's era writing about prostitution or the struggles of members of society who lived on the margins of society was risqué—both intriguing and potentially repellant—to bourgeois readers. In the 21st century, of course, we're unlikely to use the term "bourgeois" to describe our educated and affluent contemporary readers. Nevertheless, Houellebecq deliberately seeks to offend the "politically correct" sensibilities of today's predominantly feminized readers who want their fiction to reflect their expectations for a multicultural society in which "social justice" prevails. Of course, Houellebecq isn't really writing to that feminized audience, although significant numbers of women may actually read his fiction. Rather, he's catering to male readers who long to be released from the dictates of modern society that compel men to be responsive to women's desire to be treated equitably in the workplace and in the home.

Houellebecq is licentiously obscene. He has created despicable male characters as protagonists—venal in almost every respect—who psychologically and philosophically may be seen as representative "stand-ins" for the author. I contend that his protagonists aren't, strictly speaking, misogynists. Rather they are misanthropes. They are loners who detest humanity. They appear to be misogynists because they need women to fulfill their sexual needs and satisfying these desires necessitates intimacy, although this is clearly repellant to Houellebecq and his protagonists. The result is that as readers we are privy to Houellebecq's inhumanity toward women.

Yet, I believe that Houellebecq's protagonists don't appreciate men any more than women. However, this isn't necessarily apparent to readers because the interactions between the protagonists and other men are superficial. These relations are a means to an end—they facilitate opportunities at work or provide information critical to navigating the world or enable Houellebecq's protagonists to appear to observe the normative interactions essential for civility, the necessary lubricant for functioning in society. But his protagonists need not develop deep bonds with other men and, therefore, the associated loathing that will ensue since they don't "need" these relationships emotionally and sexually to survive. For Houellebecq's protagonists, other men are just background noise, either helpful or not in progressing through life. But women are essential, which requires intimacy, so the male protagonists must evince a veneer of social warmth—an artificial humanity as it were—in order to have their primal animalistic desires fulfilled.

The shock value of dispensing with accepted social norms is equally evident in Zola's fiction. Consider, for example, Henry James's response to *Nana*, the ninth book in the *Rougon-Macquart* series, which portrays the life of a prostitute, a consummate "man-eater"

intent on annihilating every male who develops feelings for her (Zola, 1972, p. 45). In reviewing the book, Henry James expressed his disgust for the subject matter: “On what authority does [M. Zola] represent nature to us as a combination of the cesspool and the house of prostitution?” James then added, “On what authority does he represent foulness rather than fairness as the sign that we are to know her by” (James citations in Levine, 2000, p. 615).

The parallels—those doubling characteristics—between the two writers become even more evident when we consider Houellebecq’s most recent novel, *Submission* (2015). His protagonist, François, is an academic, a specialist on the French literary writer Joris-Karl Huysmans, who in actuality was closely associated with Zola. Indeed, Huysmans’s novel *Marthe* (1876), about the life of a young female prostitute, impressed Zola. Huysmans dedicated his book *The Vatarad Sisters* (1879) to Zola. Later, tensions developed between the writers. Huysmans’s novel *Against Nature* (1884) became associated with “decadent” fin-de-siècle literature because of its depiction of a relationship between a man and a youth, a novel that would inspire Oscar Wilde and later writers of “gay” literature. Huysmans subsequently reembraced Catholicism. His novel *The Damned* (1891) provides a vivid portrayal of Satanism in late 19th century France.

But whereas Huysmans, the author, renews his faith in Catholicism and, by inference, reaffirms his belief in the foundational values of Western civilization, François, the protagonist in *Submission*, rejects Catholicism and, by extension, Western civilization. His spiritual agnosticism propels him to accept Islam and the institution of sharia law in France, which in Durkheimian terms must be interpreted as the death knell of French culture, if not the eventual ruin of Europe, since this acquiescence represents a willful embrace of cultural nihilism. Indeed, why not? François seems more interested in maintaining his academic job, imbibing fine wines, appreciating great cuisine, and seducing young women. The ease with which French citizens in Houellebecq’s novel *Submission* reject their cultural values and affirm Islamic law draws uncanny and uncomfortable parallels with France’s capitulation to Germany during World War II and the establishment of the collaborationist Vichy government.

It would be difficult to over emphasize the sensational impact of *Submission*. Here is a near-future dystopian novel that imagines in 2022, just a few years from now, that France willingly forgoes Western liberal democracy in favor of Islamic law. The relative ease with which French citizens jettison Western cultural values in this novel under the guise of a “moderate” French Muslim leader should be shocking to readers. All the more so given that it’s not clear how determined France—or Europe for that matter—is these days to fight to retain its heritage. Given the changing population demographics in Europe and a continental refusal to affirm Western values over Islamic cultural norms for fear of being labeled supporters of right-wing fascism and Western imperialism, the future of France and, indeed, Europe would seem to be in grave peril.

Submission was published in France on the very day that Islamic terrorists lay siege to the office of *Charlie Hebdo* and murdered twelve people there. You and I discussed these matters in January of 2015 (Sheets & Shaughnessy, 2015). The cover of *Charlie Hebdo* featured at that time a caricature of Michel Houellebecq saying, “In 2015 I’ll lose my teeth” and, more notably, commenting that by “2022 I’ll observe Ramadan” (Grey, 2015).

MFS: Why has Michel Houellebecq's fiction been considered to be so shocking to the contemporary literary reader? I'm thinking of his novel *Platform*, which seems steeped in racial hatred.

DS: First, let's view Houellebecq's fiction with respect to our cultural milieu. Here's my premise: We live in an era in which great literature is no longer being created. It used to be that people read fiction—and nonfiction—to understand the world. Now, they get their content via the Internet, which has replaced books, movies, and, to some extent, even television. Dedicated readers committed to serious literary fiction are few and far between. The ability of readers to understand complex ideas in print has greatly diminished over the years, hence the attraction of comic books, which are euphemistically referred to as graphic novels. The literary marketplace has largely been replaced with what I would call “virtue” readers, mostly women, who seek fiction that makes them feel good, smart, and politically correct. Thus literature, rather than engaging with the ugly and unpleasant truths about the world, has become a feminized retreat into fantasy that represents a “safe-space” for women. It emotionally satisfies their desire for a kinder, better society, one in which family, love, and children are central to the narrative and the primal threats of a harsh, unforgiving (male) universe have been greatly restrained or even banished from the story.

Houellebecq has upended all that. He's writing to a male audience, and he's expressing attitudes about women, sex, and society that many men feel viscerally, but are reluctant to acknowledge or discuss. His narratives challenge the politically correct orthodoxy—with a distinctly French mix of neo-Marxist sentiments commingling with ultra-nationalist viewpoints embedded with repugnant ideas about ethnicity, gender, and religion that exude a xenophobic aura. Men are either attracted or repelled by what he writes while women are generally disgusted. But in an age when real offense has been banished from literary fiction, Houellebecq is a provocateur writ large, pitching titillating content and spewing vulgarity that translates into blockbuster sales. Readers are drawn to his fiction out of affinity or curiosity or outrage. It's a brilliant marketing ploy. How much of it is feigned and how much is real is hard to determine.

So let's not confuse his fiction with great literature. In my estimation his most memorable novel thus far, *Submission*, has been aptly characterized by Mark Lilla, an academic critic, as “a minor work”, although Lilla acknowledges that its “cultural pessimism” necessarily places it alongside two of the more memorable European novels of the 20th century—“Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*” (Lilla, 2015).

Houellebecq, France's most successful “literary” writer published today, certainly wants to be regarded as a great author. Indeed, he has suggested as much given his desire to demonstrate his literary associations with Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Dostoyevsky, Balzac, as well as the memorable French poets including Hugo, Verlaine, and Mallarmé. Houellebecq has acknowledged his affinity with Auguste Comte, who created the foundations for the discipline of sociology and influenced the scientific approach to naturalism propounded by Zola (Hunnerwell, 2010).

Not surprisingly, Émile Durkheim's influence is evident in his fiction as well. Against these haute literary, philosophical, and sociological references, Houellebecq immerses the reader in the demi-monde, that post-sixties decadent milieu where the very fabric of the nation and the family have dissolved, where France is culturally cratering, where nearly everyone lives alone and many of these individuals, resembling the author, are depressives

who exhibit an assortment of antisocial tendencies. There's typically a lot of sex but no intimacy and precious little emotional satisfaction. This distinctly French dystopian landscape is drenched in Durkheimian *anomie* that gives rise to a number of social pathologies characteristic of a "fallen" society. These include misanthropic and misogynistic behavior, a loathing toward children and feminine influences, as well as an abundance of hate. This perspective is expressed in a literary style that reads almost as if it were written by an American living in Paris today. *Mon Dieu!* And the great news, at least for Houellebecq, is that while we and he know that great literature is, to use the German expression, *kaput*, the author's obscenity, his vulgarity, his parodic prose steeped in faux-haute literary simulacra saturated with degenerate impulses continues at every turn to drive phenomenal book sales.

Second, let's look briefly at some of his fiction beginning with *The Elementary Particles* (1998), which won the highly prestigious International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. This award was also given in recent years to Herta Müller and Orhan Pamuk, both of whom won the Nobel Prize in Literature. Author Julian Barnes has suggested that *The Elementary Particles* is "a novel which hunts big game while others settle for shooting rabbit" (cited in Anthony Quinn, 2000).

The premise of *The Elementary Particles* is simple enough. Two French boys, half-brothers, are abandoned by their self-styled "hippie" mother. Michel, who appears to be the author's alter ego and whose life draws parallels with Houellebecq's, is raised by one of his grandmothers and becomes a molecular biologist. Bruno, although nominally designated for the other grandmother, is essentially abandoned. Unable to sustain relationships, he becomes a sex addict and ultimately ends up in a mental institution. Michel, a loner incapable of intimacy, pioneers advances that eliminate the need for sexual intercourse for biological reproduction. But the fascination here is the societal context—the dysfunctional family, the damaging counter-culture, and the wreckage that ensues—that makes for an interesting read. As one reviewer writing in the *Independent* noted, it "came just in time to break a drought in French literature that had lasted for decades" ("Michel Houellebecq: The sex export", 2005).

Platform (2001) is a story of a Parisian man who partakes in Thailand's sex industry and subsequently hatches a plan with a woman in the tourist trade to feature upscale package tours for Europeans looking for "adventure". The novel, with its embrace of sex tourism, its relish for explicit details, its enthusiasm for prostitution, its refusal to acknowledge the sexual exploitation of minors and women, also attacks Islam. Houellebecq had arranged a publicity tour for *Platform* just days before 9/11. In an interview "with the magazine *Lire*", he appeared "drunk and belligerent". He then "justified his characters' condemnation of radical Islam" by insisting that it was "the stupidest religion in the world", noting that "when you read the Koran, it's appalling, appalling". He was charged with "inciting racial hatred". Many prominent French writers came to his defense. His testimony was based upon the premise that he "was speaking of a religion rather than of a people". The case was ultimately dismissed (citations in "Michel Houellebecq: The sex export", 2005).

The Possibility of an Island (2005) is a dystopian science fiction tale that presents the story of Daniel1—in our nearly present era—and two of his subsequent clones, Daniel24 and Daniel25, who inhabit a post-apocalyptic world in the distant future. In John Updike's review, "90% Hateful", he can hardly contain his distain when characterizing the French author's fiction: "The usual Houellebecq hero, whose monopoly on self-expression sucks up most of the narrative's oxygen, presents himself in one of two guises: a desolate loner . . . or a galvanized male porn star". He then adds, "In neither role does he ask for, nor does he

receive, much sympathy” (Updike, 2006). The depiction of Daniell’s mistress is classic Houellebecqian prose:

Like all very pretty young girls she was basically only good for fucking, and it would have been stupid to employ her for anything else, to see her as anything other than a luxury animal, pampered and spoiled, protected from all cares as from any difficult or painful task so as to be better able to devote herself to her exclusively sexual service”. (cited by Updike, 2006)

Houellebecq’s *The Map and the Territory* (2010) won France’s most esteemed literary award, the Prix Goncourt. It’s a detective story of sorts, presenting the tale of Jed Martin, a famous artist, and his associations with the art world. Michel Houellebecq is featured as a character in the novel who agrees to create the textual narrative for a catalog associated with an exhibit of Martin’s. Houellebecq is subsequently murdered, and the story becomes a gumshoe thriller with Martin as a participant in the case. Houellebecq was later accused of plagiarizing passages from Wikipedia in the novel.

MFS: Let’s discuss Zola’s fiction, specifically his novel (later a play) *Thérèse Raquin* and *Les Rougon-Macquart*, his 20-novel series comprising roughly 300 characters. How is naturalism exhibited in these works, and why do they continue to be important to us today?

DS: The novel *Thérèse Raquin* (1867) is the story of Thérèse, her lover, Laurent, and Thérèse’s dull-witted husband, Camille. In the throes of lovers’ passion, Thérèse and Laurent murder Camille by arranging a boating incident in which he drowns. Their crime never comes to light. In time the lovers marry, but the corrosive nature of their guilt undermines their relationship. Their constant fear, their impending sense of betrayal, and their propensity towards self-condemnation that devolves into pervasive terror ultimately leads them to commit a double suicide.

But, as Zola noted, it’s the undertow of these primitive emotions that ultimately transforms Thérèse and Laurent from human beings to beasts.

In *Thérèse Raquin* I wanted to study temperaments and not characters. That’s the essential point of the whole book. I chose people who were entirely dominated by their nerves and their blood, without free will, dragged into each action of their life by the fateful inevitability of their flesh. Thérèse and Laurent are human beasts, nothing more. I tried to follow, step by step, the hidden work of passion in these beasts, the pressure of instinct, the mental breakdown that follows a nervous crisis”. (Berg & Martin, 1992, p. 5)

Zola’s approach, as Berg and Martin suggest, “is more scientific than moral; his focus is on the effect of passion, not on its cause” in *Thérèse Raquin*. Thus, the plot becomes a scientific experiment of animalistic temperaments, rather than humans who act rationally and are motivated by free will. As Berg and Martin point out, “the author takes two different temperaments, adds a crime, and then describes the resultant effects”. As with his later fiction, they note, the focus is “on physiology rather than on psychology” with the author in the role of “dispassionate observer” (citations in Berg & Martin, 1992, p. 6).

If elements of Zola's naturalism are evident in *Thérèse Raquin*, they are much more systematically explored in his *Rougon-Macquart* series. The author's intent is made clear in the preface to the first novel, *The Fortunes of the Rougons* (1871).

I want to explain how a family . . . conducts itself in a given society, giving birth to ten, to twenty individuals who seem, at first glance, profoundly dissimilar, but whom analysis reveals to be intimately linked to one another. Heredity has its laws like the phenomenon of weight.

I will try to find and follow the thread that leads mathematically from one man to another, by resolving the dual question of temperament and environment. And when I hold all the threads, when I have an entire social group in my hands, I will depict this group at work as an actor in a given historical period; I will show it acting in the full complexity of its efforts; I will analyze at once the sum of the individual wills of each of its members and the general thrust of the whole. (cited in Berg & Martin, 1992, p. 10)

What, then, did Zola hope to demonstrate? He sets out in the *Rougon-Macquart* series to develop an extended narrative of four generations of a family descended from Adélaïde Fouque, a woman eventually diagnosed as a hysteric and committed to an asylum for the insane. Thus, Zola examines the genetic trait of hysteria as it is manifest in her offspring, charting the varying "temperaments" and environmental circumstances of each individual. The concluding novel, *Doctor Pascal*, presents the story of the doctor, a grandson of Adélaïde, who reveals to a relative—and hence to the reader—the entire hereditary pattern of the family.

Thus, the series has several thematic focuses. First, of course, is the focus on "heredity". Second, the family narrative is presented within the historical context of the Second Empire. Third, the series considers the environmental factors that shape behavioral outcomes. Fourth, Zola applies an "experimental method" that "consists of collecting data from nature". He then examines it "through modifications in circumstances and milieus" while, none the less, ensuring that it adheres to "the laws of nature". This, in turn, provides the basis for a scientific "knowledge of mankind" that illuminates the individualistic circumstances and the broader social implications (Berg & Martin, 1992, p. 13).

Finally, Zola's naturalism, as contrasted with Balzac's realism, focuses on workers and the less privileged. His intent is to reveal the basest, coarsest, cruelest, most bestial aspects of humanity that are generally disguised by the manners and the behavior of the upper classes. Zola's fiction was an incendiary mix of salacious scandal and depraved decadence that aided and abetted his literary success.

Perhaps no other novel in the series illustrates this as well as *Nana*, the tale of a young woman's ascent from lowly "working girl" on the streets to become the most sought after prostitute in all of Paris. Nana, the "man-eater", seduces the most desirable men in her city, becoming richer and richer, all the while destroying financially and emotionally the men who are attracted to her. Philippe Hugon, for example, is sent to jail after stealing from his army post to supply her with funds. Steiner, a banker, is ruined financially trying to satisfy her. Count Xavier de Vandeuves incurs overwhelming gambling debts in an effort to meet her insatiable desire for luxuries. He then sets fire to himself and his horses in the wake of his ruin. And these were just a few of the many lives she destroyed. Nana shook "Paris to its foundations", all the while building her fortune "on the bodies of dead men" (Zola, 1972, p. 449).

She alone was left standing, amid the accumulated riches of her mansion, while a host of men lay stricken at her feet. Like those monsters of ancient times whose fearful domains were covered with skeletons, she rested her feet on human skulls and was surrounded by catastrophes. . . . The fly that had come from the dungheap of the slums, carrying the ferment of social decay, had poisoned all these men simply by alighting on them. It was fitting and just. She had avenged the beggars and outcasts of her world. And while, as it were, her sex rose in a halo of glory and blazed down on her prostate victims like a rising sun shining down on a field of carnage, she remained as unconscious of her actions as a splendid animal, ignorant of the havoc she had wreaked. (Zola, 1972, pp. 452-453)

Nana's voracious sexual appetite, her insatiable desire for wealth, her willful destruction of all the men who come under her spell suggests, perhaps, her symbolic manifestation of the decadence and corruption corroding the Second Empire. Nor, might I add, does it end well for Nana. She dies from the ravishes of smallpox, her body reduced to "a heap of pus and blood, a shovelful of putrid flesh". Outside the crowds shout "To Berlin!" (citations, *Nana*, 1972, p. 470). The Franco-Prussian War has begun. It ends badly for France, which loses the war and with defeat comes the collapse of the Second Empire.

Zola's pioneering literary naturalism, as we discussed in Chapter 8, inspired a number of influential writers in the early 20th century America, including Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris, to create a distinctly American variant of naturalism that continues to influence contemporary authors today.

MFS: Would you consider Houellebecq's novel *Submission*, about a "moderate" Muslim governing France according to Islamic law, his most significant important novel thus far? Why has this novel received so much attention. Is it merited?

DS: Unquestionably, *Submission* is Houellebecq's most compelling work of fiction to date, if we evaluate the relative merits of literature by how well it engages with the most burning issues of our age. Certainly, much of his fiction is engaged with examining the socio-economic reality of France since the 1960s. However, *Submission* is addressing the single biggest issue of contemporary France and, indeed, of Europe and the Western world: Will Western civilization prevail over global Islamification or are we on an inexorable path to nihilistic and cultural obliteration?

In Houellebecq's interview with Sylvain Bourmeau in *The Paris Review*, he makes a number of revealing comments about *Submission* and French cultural values, which for our purposes serve as metaphors for Western civilization as a whole. The first is his conviction that "the Enlightenment is dead, may it rest in peace". He then elaborates, "My book describes the destruction of the philosophy handed down by the Enlightenment". To build on this theme he establishes François, his academic protagonist, as an expert on Huysmans. Huysmans, as French readers know, rejected the principles of the Enlightenment in favor of naturalism before embracing decadence, and, finally, returning to his Catholic faith. Thus, he becomes a mouthpiece for Houellebecq's perspective that contemporary France has rejected the principles of the Enlightenment. Indeed, Houellebecq suggests in his interview with Bourmeau that initially he conceived of the novel as a battle between Islam and the West with the West ultimately prevailing by having the protagonist undergo a conversion to Catholicism that resembles Huysmans's reembrace of his faith. Houellebecq emphasizes that "at the

beginning” the novel’s title “wasn’t mean to be called *Soumission*—the first title was *La Conversion*”. He then elaborates, “And in my original project the narrator converted, too, but to Catholicism. Which is to say, he followed Huysmans’s footsteps a century later, leaving naturalism to become Catholic” (Houellebecq citations in Bourmeau, 2015).

Houellebecq acknowledges his identification with many “Comtean” tenets, by which he means his embrace of secular humanism. Nevertheless, he is convinced that civilization requires religion: “I remain in many ways a Comptean, and I don’t believe that a society can survive without religion”. But significantly, the religion that François ultimately submits to is not Catholicism, but Islam. For as Houellebecq notes, “The book started with a conversion to Catholicism that should have taken place but didn’t” (Houellebecq citations in Bourmeau, 2015).

The case that Houellebecq is making is subtle, so I’ll elaborate. If we accept the argument made by Islamic scholar Bernard Lewis and political scientist Samuel Huntington that there is a “clash of civilizations” occurring between Western civilization and Islam, then, it follows that one set of values must prevail over the other (Lewis, 1990; Huntington, 1993). The protagonist makes a choice in *Submission*. That choice is to submit to Islam. Or as one of François’s academic colleagues notes, “Christianity and Islam have been at war for a very long time” before concluding, “but with Islam, I think, the time has come for accommodation” (Houellebecq, 2015, pp. 119-120). But let there be no doubt: In war, there can be no accommodation. One side must prevail over the other, and the victors determine the cultural values that will prevail.

The implications of *Submission* should be evident. France yields willingly to a “moderate” Islamic leader who then immediately imposes sharia law with the result that Judeo-Christian society is not only under assault, it is well on the way to obliteration. Thus, the very founding principles of Western civilization, namely, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the Western constitutional rights upon which liberty is founded are being obliterated. By agreeing to “submit” to Islam and sharia law, François has, in fact, capitulated to Islam just as France capitulated to Hitler’s Germany and gave up its Western democratic values by dint of totalitarian brute force.

But, of course, in Houellebecq’s rendering of contemporary France, the nation’s citizens barely resist and their actions are tantamount to surrender. The implications need to be made explicit: As goes France so goes Europe and, in all likelihood, the world. With the largest number of Muslims on the continent, France will be the first of the European nations to succumb—hence the title *Submission*. Indeed, given that the “moderate” Muslim Mohammed Ben Abbes has been democratically elected president “by a landslide” over the National Front leader Marine Le Pen, France’s fate eerily anticipates the entire European continent’s capitulation to Islam (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 132).

Democratic values are undermined as France is forced to choose between ultra-nationalism and a nominally moderate Islam with “socialist” leanings that ultimately will prove to be anything but moderate. Should we have any doubt as to the outcome, we watch as Ben Abbes proceeds to dismantle Western cultural institutions and Western liberties in France within days of his victory. The fact that the character Ben Abbes never appears in the novel underscores the tragic irony of the West’s defeat. Here is a “French” leader, seemingly a proxy for radical Islam, whose ultimate objective is to lay waste to Western civilization, and, yet, we never even “meet” him.

I'll dispense with a detailed plot synopsis and, instead, cite a passage from *Submission* that gives our readers a sense of the associative link between Houellebecq's novel and Zola's literary influence.

The protagonist François encounters his fellow academic Lempereur, who is an expert on Léon Bloy, a French author who reunited with his Catholic faith. Initially Bloy was friendly with Huysmans and Zola, although later Bloy developed an antipathy toward them. Lempereur's literary interpretation is as follows.

Huysmans, Zola, Barbey, Bloy—they all knew one another, were on good terms or bad, formed allegiances, quarreled among themselves. Their shared personal history is the history of French literature, and more than a century later, we keep reenacting it. We remain loyal to our old heroes. . . .

Bloy was the ultimate weapon against the twentieth century, its mediocrity, its moronic 'engagement', its cloying humanitarianism; against Sartre, and Camus, and all their political playacting; and against all those sickening formalists, the nouveau roman, the pointless absurdity of it all. . . . I still don't like Sartre, or Camus, or anything to do with the nouveau roman, and yet Bloy's virtuosity seems oppressive to me. . . . Nowadays I would rather reread Maupassant or Flaubert—or even Zola, at least certain pages. And also, of course, the inimitable Huysmans . . . (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 45)

Submission is a French novel of ideas engaged in a sustained discussion about the greatest threat to Western civilization in the 21st century. But the style, even if it's saturated with French cultural sensibility, seems almost American. It's neither dense nor difficult and the novel supplies titillating sexual plots and subplots. We learn that François, a serial sexual predator, has sequential affairs each academic year with his chosen undergraduate student. More telling is his on-again, off-again relationship with Myriam, who is Jewish and who, sensing the direction of modern France, immigrates with her parents to Israel shortly before France decisively elects its first Muslim president. While she presents this decision as temporary, we, the readers, know that given the increased hostility against Jews in France and given the subsequent electoral victory of Ben Abbes, she will never return. Her departure represents a tremendous loss for François since the reader suspects that she is the love of his life, despite his refusal to acknowledge this. His feelings of loss and, for that matter, France's failure to safeguard its Jewish citizenry harken back to the nation's abandonment of its Jews during World War II and drench the novel in nihilism.

Here's a brief passage about Myriam in which François interprets the depth of their relationship based on the pleasure she bestows on his "dick".

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. . . . This past evening, I knew, it had interceded on Myriam's behalf. It had always enjoyed good relations with Myriam, Myriam had always treated it with affection and respect, and this had given me an enormous amount of pleasure. And sources of pleasure were hard to come by. In the end, my dick was all I had. My interest in the life of the mind had greatly diminished; my social life was hardly more satisfying than the life of my body; it, too, presented itself as a series of petty annoyances—clogged sink, slow Wi-Fi, points on my license, dishonest cleaning woman, mistakes in my tax return—and these, too, followed one after another without interruption, and almost never left me in peace". (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 78-79)

France, it seems, gives way to Islam for the economic advantages of jobs, of opportunity, and the continued enticement of fine wine and cuisine, although prohibitions against alcohol, obviously, are observed in other nations observing sharia law. Indeed, the very “reasonableness” of the Islamic takeover is suggested by virtue of Ben Abbas’s ties to French culture. Then, there’s the sense that if men have their jobs, if women are, once again, subservient, if fine wine and cuisine retain their prominence in French society, what does it matter if women are forced from their jobs to return home to raise children? What does it matter if dresses and skirts disappear to be replaced by slacks and tunics with the disquieting prospect of head scarfs and burkas soon to follow? State-sanctioned education is no longer required beyond adolescence. Prohibitions on bars ensue. Polygamy—including unions with underage girls—is on the rise. François, naturally, converts to Islam and is rewarded with a prestigious academic appointment at the Sorbonne.

Might not all these changes benefit François? Men’s economic, social, and sexual prominence would be restored with women serving their interests and caring for their children. Given the anomie of Western society, the decline of the French family, and the loss of Catholic religiosity, would this not be preferable, the novel implicitly asks? How bad would it be, the narrative seems to infer, for France to become an Islamic state and, by extension, Europe and, ultimately, the world? What, after all, is so terrible if men return to dominance, women to subjugation, and family and cuisine flourish as a consequence? Might this not be an indicator, after all, that all is not so terrible with the world?

This novel has been mischaracterized by at least one critic as “satire”, but reads, as with much of Zola’s fiction, as nothing less than the most painful, the most heartbreaking Truth of our time.

MFS: What is the significance of Zola’s “J’Accuse . . . !”, then and now?

DS: On January 13, 1898, Émile Zola’s letter “J’accuse . . . !” [“I accuse”] was published on the front page of the newspaper *L’Aurore*. This letter, addressed to the French President Félix Faure and, by extension, the public at large, charged the French government with anti-Semitism in wrongly prosecuting and convicting Alfred Dreyfus, a Jew, of espionage in order to cover up the true perpetrator, who was Major Esterhazy. But as Zola noted, to indict and convict Esterhazy would, in effect, place the blame at the feet of the entire General Staff.

Over the years the expression “J’Accuse . . . !” has been used to denote outrage against egregious acts of corruption carried out by powerful agents of authority.

Zola was charged with criminal libel in February of 1898. At his trial he passionately defended Dreyfus’s innocence, an action that illustrates just how important a role prominent literary writers could potentially exert in that era.

Dreyfus is innocent, I swear it. I pledge my life that that is so, I pledge my honor. . . . Before this tribunal, which represents human justice, before you, gentlemen of the jury, who emanate from the nation, before all of France, before the entire world, I swear that Dreyfus is innocent. And by my forty years of work, by such authority as this labor may have given me, I swear that Dreyfus is innocent. And by all that I have conquered, by the name that I have made for myself, by my works, which have advanced the cause of French letters abroad, I swear that Dreyfus is innocent. May it all crumble, may my works perish if Dreyfus is not innocent! He *is* innocent. (Zola cited in Brown, 1995, p. 741)

Zola was convicted of the maximum allowable punishment, which was one year. When it seemed virtually certain that his appeal would fail, Zola exiled himself to England where he remained for eleven months until Dreyfus's conviction was overturned. A new trial ensued. Dreyfus was declared "guilty with extenuating circumstances" (Berg & Martin, 1992, p. 162). He was eventually pardoned in 1899 and ultimately cleared of all charges.

Zola died in 1902 of carbon monoxide poisoning, which some critics—then and in more recent times—have attributed to murder. His funeral was a celebratory procession with some 60,000 mourners, many following his casket through the streets of Paris with cries of "Glory to Zola!" Here was a man celebrated for his humanitarianism and his pursuit of truth and justice. Indeed, Anatole France, a fellow novelist and noted critic, characterized Zola as nothing less than "a moment in the human conscience". His remains, transferred to the Pantheon in 1908, were "rightfully placed alongside those of Voltaire, Rousseau, and Victor Hugo" (citations in Berg & Martin, 1992, p. 163).

Zola's commitment to truth and literature and his determination to tell the forbidden stories of his time serve as constant reminders to all of us of what makes for great literature.

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