

The echoes of XIXth century in the work of Michel Houellebecq (Balzac, Zola, Huysmans, Auguste Comte, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Lamartine)

Summary

Keywords: *Michel Houellebecq, echoes, nineteenth century, realism, naturalism, decadence, romantic, anti-modern, postmodern, dialogism, thresholds, palimpsest.*

Our study raises the why of references and allusions of a Michel Houellebecq to authors of the XIXth century, representatives of romanticism and first witnesses of modernity, such as Balzac, Zola, Huysmans, Auguste Comte, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Lamartine. What do they have to say to Michel Houellebecq? In our view, it is in line of these modern authors that Houellebecq undertakes the critique of postmodern society.

At the heart of our comparative approach, it is the opposition that Houellebecq establishes between the XXth century and the XIXth century, from which he justifies his preference for the literature of the nineteenth century: "I claim the idea that, aesthetically, the XX^e century did not produce much. It's a mediocre century. The XIXth century is the top of what the West could produce"¹. If Houellebecq orients to the XIXth century rather than to the XXth century (or the XVIIIth), it's because the XIXth century represents the beginning of the modern world and, as a result, the beginning of the anti-modern protestation. This heavy bias of meanings implies a central issue of his work: *how to resist the coldness of the modern fashion, be it that of liberalism or the irreligious spirit*? We would say that his protestation takes two simultaneous forms, on the one hand, the socialism, oriented towards the concrete transformation of society, on the other hand, romance, directed to imaginary, poetry. Houellebecq joined the representatives and first witnesses of modernity in their protest towards psychological and sociological injuries caused by the subordination of the mass to dissolute manners of modern times. This allows to understand his sharp judgments against the Revolution, that led to the amplification of individualism in Europe.

¹ *The female author, Their XIX^e century. Michel Houellebecq - The possibility of a XIXth century*, interview conducted by Agathe Novak-Chevalier, in *The store of the XIXth century*, 2011, no. 1, p. 12. We find this parallel in the text *Out of the 20th century*: "In scientific and technical terms, the 20th century can be placed at the same level as the 19th century. In terms of literature and thought, on the other hand, the collapse is almost unbelievable, especially since 1945, and the appalling record", see Michel Houellebecq, *Interventions 2*, 2009, p. 225.

From there, we reach another critical issue: *can we reconcile the anti-modern attitude of Houellebecq and his positioning in full post-modern age?* We recognize as an assumption that it is both a romantic and socialist antimoderne as compared to the XIXth century and a postmodern of today globalization, taking into consideration that his pessimism corresponds to that of many observers at the time disappointed by modernity, postmodernism being only “another name to signify the moral and aesthetic decadence of our times”². There will be no break between *antimoderne* and *postmodern*, since Houellebecq continues the antimodernes model, though with mixed ways characteristic to postmodern art. The mechanism which he uses to describe the decadence of the contemporary society echoes to the social decomposition deplored by Balzac after 1789 and 1830 and clinically analyzed by Zola from the perspective of great torment and mistakes under the Third Republic. All this is based on common causes summarized in three words: liberalism, individualism, capitalism. Postmodernism played by Houellebecq continues within these three terms born in the modern era, while noting their current inclinations: hedonism, consumption, atomization.

The merger of the echoes of the nineteenth century in the houellebecquienne work leads us to the development of a plan that does not follow the classic categorization between form and content. Thus, every aspect of our study aims a plural approach focused on the specifics of the actual writing, according to both ideological, aesthetic and thematic orientation. We divide the thesis in three main parts, corresponding to the voices of novelists (Houellebecq, Balzac, Zola, Huysmans), of philosophers (Houellebecq, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche), of poets (Houellebecq, Lamartine, Baudelaire).

The first part, *Houellebecq and the novelists*, introduces the romance houellebecquienne work in the fabric of three great currents of the XIXth century: realism - in reference to Balzac, naturalism - represented by Zola, decadentism – with the image of Huysmans. The reference to Balzac is constant at Houellebecq; the presence of Zola is more discreet. Huysmans has arisen into *Submission*. The analysis of these three echoes, with which Houellebecq’s novels are impregnated allows us to establish, on the one hand, the link between the description of the contemporary society and the status of the individual living there and, on the other hand, a comparison between the image of the postmodern reality and that of the modern era, as it reveals itself after the Revolution. We follow this link, guided by the representation of the (post) modern society, under

² Gilles Lipovetsky, *The era of vacuum. Essays on contemporary individualism*, 1989, p. 172.

the influence of liberalism. From here, we become aware of the social and psychological discomfort of the individual devoid of benchmarks, that one will have to identify while ascending to his family problems, to ideological hesitations issued from an instability doubled by the permanent bad luck or of more or less real sickly symptoms.

At the level of the peculiarities of the houellebecquienne writing, the presence of Huysmans, with his scriptural innovations, leads us towards the consideration of a pastiche that mocks at the realistic / naturalists strategies of building of the diegesis. The back and forths between observation, documentation, description and disturbances of sense, leading to all kinds of explanatory comments, reveal the decadent shades of houellebecquiens realism and naturalism.

The second part, *Houellebecq and the philosophers*, wants to be a continuation of the previous pane in a philosophical direction, the houellebecquien novel becoming the “natural place for the expression of debates or philosophical rifts”³. We deal first with the ideas of Auguste Comte on religion and love, that Houellebecq updates in the form of truths open to reflection. After the illustration of all kinds of liberal society-specific manifestations, he gives himself the task to deeply dig, to bring out the excess and especially the lacks, of bringing a remedy in the form of a new religion. He submits even the art to the superiority of the philosophical thought, giving it, just like Comte, a social significance.

We take then a step aside, still with the philosophers travelling to Germany in order to visit the two tutelar figures surrounding the houellebecquienne meditation, that of Nietzsche and that of Schopenhauer. So it comes to a bio-metaphysics suffering, the consequences of which remind the laws of determinism. Interferences with schopenhauerienne and nietzschean philosophies gives the narrative journey of the protagonists meditative stops on temporality, historical progress, the status of a new being (neo-humain), the reduction of the relationships to the primacy of sexual instincts and, finally, on the inevitable decision of refusing, with Schopenhauer, or agreeing, with Nietzsche, the usual course of life. It is, anyway, observed in *Submission*, a bifurcation by which Houellebecq seems to depart from Schopenhauer to the benefit of Nietzsche. We identify this feeling of hard-living through the writing of *resentment*, to re-use the word of Nietzsche, sometimes manifested under the impulse of revenge (desire to murder, xenophobia, racism, sexual insults), specific to the type like schopenhauerien romantic, sometimes of gratification, specific to the Nietzschean superior man. This superior being decides to accept his destiny and make

³ Michel Houellebecq, *Interventions 2*, 2009, p. 152.

deductions with respect to which he makes assumptions of social, political, religious and family reconfiguration.

The third part has two subdivisions: *Houellebecq and poets* and *The houellebecquienne work between utopia and dystopia*.

In dialogue with Lamartine and Baudelaire, Houellebecq considers the healing of the humanity, borrowing a lyrical tone whose resonances preserve in places the echoes of a pathetic expression. He doesn't turn towards Comte's religion of humanity this time, but to the art, or if you prefer, to the sacralization of art. We therefore record his work, represented by the novels, as well as by the poems, in the romantic tradition. If the philosopher made the deductions, the poet gives free course to his visions. The solutions arising therefrom are always talking about the society, but the tones vary, driven by the strength of hope. If the reference to Baudelaire is frequent and explicit in the houellebecquien corpus, we will discover that, to be less visible, the voice of Lamartine does not matter less in the sensitivity of our author.

The second aim of our third part covers the positioning of the work of Houellebecq between utopia and dystopia. We try to highlight the way he builds it around the themes and symbols invested with constructive/destructive accents by an act of creation that becomes itself a theme with the function of a catalyst. This open space also receives transformations with parody nuances, which highlights once again the multitude of interpretations that are used by his subjects and his prophetic projects.

The study of the houellebecquienne work as a mirror of the contemporary world through the echoes of the nineteenth century requires appropriate research methods which take into account its complex problematics. Our main method of analysis is the comparative method as a means of approach to the analogies between the writings of Houellebecq and those of the writers of the XIXth century. It requires a plural reading of the houellebecquienne work, in the light of the sociocritique and of the poetics as a critical method having as an object the subtle movements of intertextuality.

We lend the model of sociology of literature to Lucien Goldmann, that we adapt to our own goal, starting with the research of "homologies and meaningful relationships with the intellectual, social, political and economic structures"⁴ of the era of the nineteenth century, a step that allows

⁴ Lucien Goldmann, *For a sociology of the novel*, 1964, quoted by Jean-Yves Tadié in *the XXth century literary criticism*, 1987, p. 167

us to “determine the immanent significant structures”⁵ to the romantic work of Houellebecq. To determine the transfer of the social structure in the literary form, we hold as essential mediators the dominant (post)modern principles, money and individualism, problematic characters « whose thinking and behavior remain dominated by qualitative values [...] which can’t however completely escape “the market action”»⁶, the topics related to liberal society, the development of the feeling of emotional need. The sociocritique envisaged by Goldmann is inseparable from a research of ideological nature. In our case, the analysis of ideological tensions has a relationship with a narratological and thematic approach whose effectiveness depends on their contribution to the clarification of the profound meaning of the houellebecquienne work.

Confused characters introduced on stage (losers, second-raters, bored frameworks, prostitutes, rejected women), obsessive themes (liberalism, individualism, inconstancy, death, disease, sexual impulse/inhibition, missing faith, broken families, art, violence, love and loneliness), these are all answers that Houellebecq imposes to a society giving birth to victims unable to respond. It is from these invariants of his work that we get to delimit an ideological itinerary, leading on the one hand, to the immersion in the trivial actuality, and on the other hand to the net refusal thereof. Because, first, his texts denounce the defective reality to which most individuals seem to acquiesce. Their shape is defined as follows taking into consideration the integrated content and social discourse, the novelist constituting a collective sense from which individuals find themselves in the same social circumstances and discover thoughts and collective feelings.

By a narratological approach channeled on the status of the protagonists, we seek to bring out their troubled psychology. These often coincide with the narrator or either with the author (some aspects of their portraits being inspired by the life of Houellebecq). The narrative follows the course of their memories, fantasies, actions, projects which follow literary / scientific references, explanations and comments, the author striving to multiply the viewpoints. The language is consistent with the themes addressed. All these elements make the houellebecquien novel a condensed, hybrid product.

The analysis of thematic order is imposed by the participation of the recurring themes in the transfer of meanings on the text, next to the role of the actants. We are driven inevitably to bear

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

the impact on the diegesis that these themes raise by the repetition and their antagonism, the author returning several times to a same subject, judged differently, according to the echo that guides him and according to the personality of the character that addresses it. Similarly, the choice of a certain topic reflects the lag or coherence “between the conscious intentions of the artist and the forms in which he embodies his vision of the world”⁷. By *vision of the world*, we understand, in line with Goldmann, “a point of view *consistent and unitary* on the whole of reality”⁸. The forms that it sees in the eyes of Houellebecq, sometimes exaggerated, do not always coincide with his intentions.

The passage of the novel to poetry, that Houellebecq softens through familiar binders to readers of his romantic work, ask for clarification on how to use the lyrical and pathetic tones. These tonalities allow us to notice a change in the psychological attitude of the author, a change of irritation, cynicism, irony, manifested in novels with animated moderation or even enthusiasm in poems. At this level, we look at the treatment of a few prominent stylistic figures including the oxymoron and the antithesis, as well as the symbols of the island and the water, while remaining faithful to parallels novel - poetry, society – literary work. In poetry, as well as in the novel, “one can feel the material and social conditions in which it is elaborated”⁹. The poet expresses on encountered individuals, areas visited, but with different tones as compared to the novelist. The integration of remarks on the versification leads to new interpretations, even more so that the fixed form of alexandrians competes with the hybrid structure of the novel. Our analysis of the symbols of the island and the water bends to the criticism of the imaginary explained by Georges Blin, according to which the description “is not – as it is commonly said today – “a break in the story”; it is related to heros, to his being-in-the-world”¹⁰. Houellebecq’s use of these symbols (in his novels and poems) is mentioned through the sensations associated with a lively apprehension of the world that its characters / the lyrical I feel.

The complex structure of the houellebecquienne work is highlighted by a series of intertextuels concepts from which we look at the subtle play of texts and different contexts.

A first employee concept dates back to the *bakhtinien dialogism*, the word “echo” and especially his use in the plural referring to orality and polyphony which Bakhtin used for the

⁷Lucien Goldmann, *Dialectical research*, 1959, quoted by Jean-Yves Tadié, *The literary criticism in the XXth century*, 1987, p. 165.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁹ Jean-Louis Cabanès, Guy Larroux, *Criticism and literary theory in France (1800-2000)*, 2005, p. 320.

¹⁰ Georges Blin, *Stendhal and the problems of the novel*, 1954, quoted by Elisabeth Ravoux-Rallo, *Methods of literary criticism*, 1999, p. 25, digital format.

theorization of literary statement in relation to other voices (author, recipient, current and previous social reality). We consider that Houellebecquienne writing produces an effect of orality by integrating in the textual tissue, as well as in the daily life of its time as past family events. The voice of the authors of the nineteenth century mingle with that of Michel Houellebecq, giving birth to a new work, rich in paradoxes, judgments, speech of all kinds (meditations, debates, encyclopedic records), genres (essay, poetry, love, polar, scientific novel), literary currents, references to different social contexts.

The text and the outside world are two entities closer in this dialogue, traceable not only in the text field, but also beyond its borders. We will, thus, turn away from the textual approach proposed by Kristeva and Barthes, particularly from their refusal of filiation with the sources of a text, which is independent of the story, the intentions of the author, his biography etc. If the representatives of the movement *Tel Quel* had withdrawn the communication with sociolects and idiolects within the *enclosed text*, we will translate the dialogical principle not only from the text, but also in the light of social changes of the major periods in the history from the XIXth century to the XXIth century. The social discourse comes to join the inherent game of language and forms. So it will be a dialogue between literary text and social discourse that we will favor in our study, taking into account the aesthetic, ideological and cultural particularities of each participating author.

From this intertextual dialogue with an extensive trend, we will rely in a second time on the systematic distribution of transtextual relations, established by Gérard Genette.

When it comes to concepts related to the first category of transtextuality, a reference will be made to explicit forms of intertextuality, namely *the quotation, the reference, the allusion* and to a lesser extent to *plagiarism*, an implicit form. We will give a special attention to the meaning, to the stylistic effect, to the role of the quote in the context where Houellebecq chooses to integrate it. The references will allow us to capture the echoes between texts connected by a theme, character, idea, a common vision. Tracking references request from us an intuitive interpretation which highlights what the author does not express directly, but what will contribute to the strengthening of the network of intertextual links opened in front of us. According to Houellebecq, his use of plagiarism works as a literary method close to the quote (as Lautréamont), unless he sees a fraud attempt.

The metaphors of *thresholds* and *palimpsest* occupy a special place in our study. We retain the concept of *threshold* in the sense of “privileged place of a pragmatic and a strategy, of an action on the public, to service, good or badly understood and accomplished, of a better reception of the text and of a more relevant reading”¹¹. The epigraphs, prefaces, interviews, talks, the comments accompanying the work will make the transition between eras and the texts submitted to our comparative analysis. These produce different effects on the edge of the source text, effects that the reader is supposed to interpret in the light of all the knowledge he has.

In regards to the concept of *palimpsests*, we conceive it as space of the Houellebecq texts, behind which one can be seen the traces of earlier writings that the author of the dominant text kindly keeps. The palimpsest is thus “a parchment the first inscription of which it struck to draw another, which doesn’t absolutely hide it so that one can read, by transparency, the old under the new”¹². Its use in the figurative sense, namely “any works derived from a previous work, through transformation or imitation”¹³ requestes additional details on the compatibility with the texts of the Houellebecq parchment. In this way, of all hypertextual genres strictly delimited by Genet, the pastiche that Houellebecq practice in an echo to Huysmans outbids the humoristic dimension of his own writings, even if it in fact hides an acid criticism of the retained excesses of the hypotexte, in the manner of Huysmans.

The *parodic character* of the Houellebecq work appears out of the literal use of a quote, of a word attached by Houellebecq to the frame of his own visions. A serious subject in the hypotexte loses its power in the context of a comic approach. As a result of Genette, Michel Butor approves the parodic scope of the quote: “The most literal citation is already to some extent a parody. The mere collection transforms it, the choice in which I insert it, its cutout, [...] the relief that I operate inside, and naturally the way I approach it, which it is taken out of my comment”¹⁴.

The Houellebecq writing respects the course of back and forth between the aesthetization of the real by the force of verses, withdrawal, search for incorruptible shelters in the present, utopian projection of an improved future. These oscillatory movements justify the appeal true to the irony. Too connected to illusory dreams, that would have increased its disillusionment

¹¹ Gérard Genette, *Thresholds*, 1987, p. 8

¹² Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests, La littérature in the second degree*, 1982, IVth cover.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Michel Butor, *The criticism and the invention*, Directory III, 1968, quoted by Nathalie Piegay-Gros, *Introduction to intertextuality*, 1996, pp. 175.

emerged after the finding of their mirage. Irony also comes from many failures of characters and rises unstably, sometimes by a terrible resentment, violent accusations, vulgar words, and sometimes by an inhibited resentment, pathetic screaming, comic intrusions, utopian ambitions. The poetry integrated in the novel is a technique that Houellebecq uses to harmonize the lucid judgment about the criticized society and the emotional inclination which drives it to improve in order to reintegrate. He likes to retain all these variations, suggesting that nothing is as certain or as easy as it seems. This use of irony invokes the echo of the romantic laughter defined as “lyrical communication’s privileged medium. Laughter is indeed an instrument of extraordinary power, as it immediately makes you understand and share [...] a vision of the personal and complex world”¹⁵. More than a tool of an uncensored cynic, the irony reflects the downgrading of the emotional feelings of the lyrical sensitivity, so coveted. As we tried to show it throughout our study, the originality of the houellebecquienne work consists in putting forward a coherent vision of the world, despite the arsenal of methods and conflicting judgments which the author uses thanks to its ability to revalue readings that could pass for outdated in the context of customs, ideologies and current needs.

¹⁵ Alain Vaillant, *Dictionary of Romanticism*, 2012, p. LXXVI.