

The Houellebecq Cure. All Malady Will End in the Neohuman

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Abstract:

Michel Houellebecq's characters frequently suffer from an obsessive thought of death: an insufferable torment undergone especially by ageing individuals. The genetically modified human clone, the neohuman, and his regime, are especially designed to at once eradicate this obsession through immortality and apprehend it through intellectual and scientific lucidity. Paradoxically however, it is seen to return and disrupt also this existential state. Focusing on Maurice Blanchot's question of the secret, 'The Houellebecq Cure' seeks to more closely define this obsession that is pivotal to Houellebecq's tragic scenarios. Moreover, it traces out the significant interaction between the thought and the "irrational" drives of love and carnality. In this light, it argues that the failure of the neohuman predicament hinges on a suppression of these drives. Its impassive detachment is seen to be similar to the existential state of the ageing human. What this points to is ultimately the futility of all efforts of subjectivity at mastering an anguish that comes from what is exterior to it; an anguish that, in truth, constitutes it.

1 Subjectivity in Michel Houellebecq's fiction is constituted through experiences of its own failure. As seen especially in his major novels *Atomised* and *The Possibility of an Island*, the suffering of its helplessness invests subjectivity with its self-referential existence and its logic. "It is in failure, and through failure, that the subject constitutes itself [...]" (Houellebecq, *Island* 118). Subjectivity is defined as a *compulsive reactivity* to its prior impotence. It seems to arise only inasmuch as it *is* a resistance to its own failure, a mechanism that *is* the force of a self-preservation. In Houellebecq, this obdurate self-assertion that is man, finds its most powerful instrument, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in the scientific worldview, "the arbiter of unique, irrefutable truth" (Houellebecq, *Atomised* 377).

2 The nature of this spokesman for subjectivity's self-assertion, its ruthlessly rationalistic outlook where God is absent and death final, is seen, however, to be ultimately incapable in sustaining humanity. At its heart is the irredeemability of death, the prospect of which is an occasion for the most agonizing distress in the subject, its reentry into the suffering of its impotence. "In contemporary Western society, death is like *white noise* to a man in good health; it fills his mind when his dreams and plans fade. With age, the noise becomes increasingly insistent, like a dull roar with an occasional clang" (95).

3 This in turn inspires the subject's irrational and unrelenting search to *affirm itself* through the intimacy of love: "Love seems to have been, for humans of the final period, the acme and the impossible, the regret and the grace, the focal point upon which all suffering

and joy could be concentrated” (I 162). On the other hand is the sexual drive which is creating “an artificial mankind, a frivolous one that will no longer be open to seriousness or to humour, which, until it dies will engage in an increasingly desperate quest for *fun* and sex; a generation of definitive *kids*” (26).

4 The intense experiences of love and sexuality however are defined by their fleetingness inasmuch as the subject’s will is always falling short of them. The brief taste of such experiences serves only to render their elusiveness ever more agonizing. The subject is again and again brought to face its own insufficiency. That suffering that instigates the crazed monomania of love and sexual pleasures is finally also what subverts this monomania. For Houellebecq, humanity is led straight into its suffering by the same movement of escape from it.

5 In what follows, I will attempt to address this suffering as an obsessive thought of death, and trace its intrinsic relationship with the sexual-love instinct. Moreover, in this light, I will examine closely the particular nature of Houellebecq’s neohuman and its similarity to the ageing human.

6 The neohuman is science’s endeavour to create a being that does not grow old and die and who therefore does not know death existentially through its recurrent obsessive thought. Since this thought is what initiates the monomania of love and debauchery, the neohuman must also be an intrinsic neutralization of such tendencies – an asexual being. “According to the Supreme Sister, jealousy, desire and the appetite for procreation share the same origin, which is the suffering of being. It is the suffering of being that makes us seek out the other, as a palliative; we [the neohumans] must go beyond this stage to reach the state where the simple fact of being constitutes in itself a permanent occasion for joy [...]” (I 326).

7 Immortality is achieved by the DNA cloning of humans, every clone giving rise to another one once his expiration time arrives. The process of memory transfer from one clone to another is accomplished by the life story – the memoirs written by the human whose DNA sample has been stored for cloning after his death. Indeed, a substantial part of the neohuman’s activity is expected to involve a contemplation of the life story and the writing of a commentary about it. This commentary will then in turn be also contemplated upon by the succeeding clone whose knowledge would thus be relatively more mature. In truth, what is perhaps mostly significant about the neohuman’s life is its undivided predilection to rational and scientific knowledge. The contemplation of the life story and its commentaries is undertaken not simply to give that neohuman the memory of his predecessor but to help him or her understand “mankind in its weaknesses, its neuroses, its doubts; we had to make them

entirely ours, in order to go beyond them” (154). Likewise the studying of the writings of the Supreme Sister and the Seven Founders has to do primarily with the acquisition of a knowledge that seeks to rationally comprehend everything once and for all, including all the things that humanity never understood about itself: all emotions and tendencies that devolve on the death predicament. The neohuman theory is thus also the attempt to reach an epitome of rational understanding.

8 Pivotal to the neohuman’s state and form of life is “[t]he existence of a residual mental activity, detached from all everyday concerns and oriented towards pure knowledge” (371). The neohuman continuously abides in the detached impassivity of what he or she considers as the “obvious neutrality of the real” (393): an existence of disciplined indifference to any individual inclinations and instincts. This ideal condition to reach the acme of knowledge is enacted through a life predetermined by routines, adamant to change, and grafted by “an exhaustive cartography of all imaginable life situations” (392). Moreover, neohumans live a sedated life in isolation, communicating with each other only electronically, and their very biology has been modified to decrease emotional intensity such as pain and joy.

9 True contemplative detachment is a total withdrawal into a noumenal sphere, a mental stasis or intemporality exercised to ponder all forms exterior to it and their alterations. Having given himself or herself to the regime and already submitted his or her individuality to the rational will, the neohuman is a spectator looking detachedly at the world as a spectacle, a world that cannot touch or alter the subject, that excludes and suppresses the being’s “irrational” drives for happiness.

10 This condition however is by no means secure in the serenity and equanimity it is supposed to inspire: “[the lucid thought that knew deliverance] had only been produced in insignificant proportions, and it was, on the contrary, sadness, melancholy, languid and finally mortal apathy that had submerged our disincarnated generations” (383). Everything in the neohuman’s regime is set to conform the world to the neutral lucidity of intellectual mastery: “We live, however; we go through life, without joy and without mystery [...]” (3). As Maurice Blanchot points out however, to submit oneself to a life “without secrets and which has taken away all possibilities” (Blanchot, *Step* 46) can also lead to a suffering of that very secret of “*no secret, or no appearance of any secret*” (Blanchot, *Disaster* 137). A life designed to exclude the unknown of secrecy finds itself suffering from this very lack of secrecy, the unbearable in the *excessive familiarity* of everything. Daniel24’s last poem before he dies testifies precisely to this specific affliction, as do the several neohumans who abscond from their isolation to venture out into the world in search of their brethren:

*Insects bang between the walls,
Limited to their tedious flight
Which carries no message other
Than the repetition of the worst. (I 153)*

11 For Blanchot, in the secret, phenomena become too transparent in their habitualness to be recognized as real. Phenomena degrade into *appearance*, and in this sense the visibility of their over-familiarity, of boredom, drags them into equivocation (see also Levinas, *Totality* 90-2). Their apparition announces an indecisiveness of everything, an anonymity that is a hollowing out of all sense. Presence appears as a disturbing, even perverse absence, an “exteriority without interiority” (Massie 49). Grippled by this repulsive ennui, a hiatus opens *within* the I and its rational powers of mastery. Like “wounds, spasms, cataleptic seizures” (Shaviro 139), the I finds itself incessantly *given up* helplessly to a passivity too passive, too infinitely lacking to be felt or understood. This is usually a physical suffering that is outside the subject’s power of suffering it. It is undergone precisely as what *cannot* be suffered, endured, and “*because of this non-power*, one cannot cease suffering it” (Blanchot, *Conversation* 44). Specifically, this is the existential suffering of an excess of impotence in subjectivity, a “death of which one does not die, a death without power, without effect, without achievement” (Blanchot, *Community* 49).

12 We are once again before the suffering of the thought, this time subverting that regime that is constructed precisely to neutralize it. The cause lies in the inherent nature of the rational worldview itself. There exists an untranslatable disjunction between reason and the “irrational” drives of love and carnality. There is in truth no rational comprehension of the drives amongst the neohumans, how they are really like, why they are pursued with such ardour, how they can be controlled. “Goodness, compassion, fidelity and altruism therefore remain for us impenetrable mysteries [...]” (I 118). Neither can they understand fear or regret, the “dull dereliction” (118) caused by their solitary individual lives, also undergone during those moments they are dying. They merely rationalize it to a “failure in perception” (118) and thus as inevitable and deterministic. There is thus *still* a persistence of emotion in the neohuman though this has been “moderated” (139) through artificial biological alterations and the absence of physical contact that the regime itself calls for (141-42). Rather than comprehending the drives and incorporating them into itself, the neohuman regime therefore functions by *excluding* them through a process of suppression, distancing, and then forgetting. And it does so because it knows that these drives lead to the thought’s suffering.

13 Ironically however, it is *because* the regime closes itself from the drives that it suffers the thought, that it is ruptured by its own insufficiency. The thought is caused by the insufficiency inherent in the lucidity of the rational worldview.

14 A similar lucidity is undergone by those human characters that have been forced to retreat from or live through a fatal disappointment in love and sexual pleasures. Particular to their torment is the emptiness left after the irrevocableness of such a failure, the presentiment that all possibility of joy in life has been exhausted. This sense of a terminus coincides with a consciousness of ageing and its effects on the body. Characters such as Annabelle and Michel in *Atomised* and Daniel and Isabelle in *The Possibility of an Island* are eventually all subjected to this obsessive thought. They are subjected mentally and emotionally to the traumatic “revelation” of a horror that keeps on *returning*. What returns is an exposure to the dread of death as alterity, as an *inaccessible proximity*: the dread of an *inability* to reach for or escape from this proximity. As Emmanuel Levinas would put it, subjectivity suddenly finds that “[i]n its skin it is stuck in its skin, not having its skin to itself, a vulnerability”, “the against oneself that is in the self” (Levinas, *Otherwise* 51). It is unable “to escape from [its] compromised identity any more than [it] can retain it or assert it” (Shaviri 103). The anguish in the thought’s return is the subject’s torture of being unable to become what it is not; of being unable to get out of itself, forget itself, and enter its otherness – death; of its self-consciousness as a confinement. Its anguish is also however at the same time the fear to surrender itself to what is not the self: the fear that comes with self-preservation and regards death as an ever looming menace from which it can have no respite. Subjectivity is compelled to be other and yet it cannot be so. “[T]here is no more justification for my presence here,” Daniel admits,

no more human contact, no more assignable objective. There is, however, something else, something terrible, which floats in space, and seems to want to approach me. Before any sadness, any sorrow or any clearly definable loss, there is something else, which might be called the *pure terror of space* [...]. There is no longer any real world, no world, no human world, I am outside time, I no longer have any past or future. I have no more sadness, plans, nostalgia, loss or hope; there is only fear. (*I* 373)

15 Houellebecq’s phenomenon of the senescent broken body, in Isabelle and Daniel for instance, refers precisely to a subjectivity that is at once itself and not itself: it *is*, it finds itself *as* – the incapability to react in any way to the menace of emptiness, its otherness gnawing away at it. Hence the logic of suicide for Annabelle and Christiane in *Atomised* in a desperate attempt at mastering the otherness of their death rather than having to suffer oneself as helpless to its approach: “This weight up of pleasure and pain which, sooner or later, everything is forced to make, leads logically, at a certain age, to suicide [...]. In part, this is

probably because [people] are somewhat tired of life; but the principal reason is that nothing – not even death – seems worse than the prospect of living in a broken body” (*A* 297).

16 Together with suicide, the drive for relief is sought also in the taking of sleeping-pills, tranquilizers, and relentless routine (*A* 336; *I* 116). Having parted company with the intensity of love and the sexual, what is now desperately sought for through all these means is a numbing of sensitivity, an impassive detachment, even the state of an anaesthetized nothingness: “I want for nothing” (*I* 116). This is not unlike the *secure*, mentally static, and self-affirming stance of the neohuman’s “obvious neutrality of the real” (393), though the intention of the latter is primarily intellectual lucidity. In both cases we have a state of being that is an ironic imitation of the emptiness of “[t]he Buddhist disengagement from the body” (384). “I live a quiet, a joyless life,” Annabelle tells Michel. “At nights I read, I make herbal tea and hot drinks. I go to see my parents every weekend, I spend a lot of time looking after my nephew and my nieces. Sometimes I get scared at night; sometimes I feel that I need a man around. I take tranquillizers and sleeping pills, but they’re never really enough. I just want life to go by as quickly as possible” (*A* 279-80).

17 Routine activities lull through their repetition. They repeat the actions of a past that has long lost its meaningful glow: activities undertaken after all activities have ceased to matter. They are performed in the name of an emotion or a meaning that has long faded from the individual’s existence. “[H]uman existence resembles a theatre performance which, begun by living actors, is ended by automatons dressed in the same costumes” (*I* 189-90). Ageing, for Houellebecq, is the indefinite continuation of an existence that has ceased to really belong to oneself.

18 A significant instance of such activity is the human’s and the neohuman’s “nostalgia for desire” (371). Nostalgia for desire is the desire for that bygone desire of self-affirmation in the happiness of love and carnality. We have already seen that the promise of such a self-affirmation is always already marked by its own futility, even when that self does briefly experience its plenitude in such moments. What distinguishes nostalgia for desire in this case is its occurrence at a double remove from its object. Not only does the subject now desire a goal that it *might* reach but never does, but now the *nature* of its very desire is jaded, its desire is already a failure. Whereas the goal in the first desire lies in an unreachable futurity that nonetheless seduces because the desire is truly *felt*, the goal in the second desire has always already died, it is always already buried in an irrevocable past; it is *not* felt, and yet it is *still* strained for. “Not only does sexual desire not disappear, but with age it becomes even crueller, more and more wrenching and insatiable [...] it becomes, and this is maybe even

worse, *cosa mentale*, the desire for desire” (275). Thought rather than heartfelt, this fatal desire is nonetheless the impetus behind many of the neohumans leaving their solitary lives and venturing out into the world in the hope of meeting other neohumans.

19 “I don’t know exactly what awaits me,” Marie23 says, “but I know that I need to live more” (333). And yet none of the neohumans that act upon this desire seem to meet with their brethren to experience the joy of physical and psychological communion. Daniel25, after assuming that Marie23 has failed in her search, is seen to finally abandon his venture and spend the rest of his days in an unknown beach near the sea. Once again, he seems to give in to the infinite passivity that characterizes the neohuman “real”. Daniel25 finds himself once again surrendered to the existential state proposed by his regime: an existential state that for him has now become more akin to “a certain fatalism, linked to an awareness of our own immortality, that brought us closer to the ancient human people” (415). Gone are the illusions of the regime’s promise of omniscient mastery: “I had not found deliverance [...]. The future was empty; it was the mountain. My dreams were populated with emotional presences. I was, I was no longer. Life was real” (422-23).

20 Desire for desire, much like its former more vigorous version, merely *delays* the thought’s suffering. At heart here is the inexorable turning of a vicious circle. The thought constitutes subjectivity and its actions which are at once also defined as a compulsive reactivity to the thought, an assertive resistance. Resistance through reason and science fails due to those limits particular to their nature that they are incapable of crossing. The thought’s return then instigates and constitutes a resistance through the stronger “irrational” drives – which can here therefore be recognized as *symptoms* of the disease. Failure at this point is owing to the inadequacy of the subject’s will. Subjectivity thus finds itself as a vessel for the thought’s return, a *means* by which the thought subverts. Sexuality and love are thus also recognized as *catalysts* of the disease.

21 In this respect, the neohuman follows a life-cycle similar to that of the human. Even though he or she has overcome death through cloning and the life story, his or her existential state remains analogous to that of human senescence, the “grey age” (33). And this is seen not just in the impassiveness and routine-oriented life but also in the suffering from certain “[m]ental configurations [that] generally survive the reality that gave rise to them” (415-16): the thought. And inasmuch as the neohuman suffers the thought, he or she is still dependent on sexuality and love which are intrinsically its symptoms and catalysts: a dependency undergone as nostalgia for desire.

22 As Daniel²⁵ admits resignedly: “Our existence, devoid of passions, had been that of the elderly; we looked on the world with a gaze characterized by lucidity without benevolence. The animal world was known, human societies were known; no mystery was hidden in it, and nothing could be expected from it, except the repetition of carnage” (406-7).

23 The visibility of a world where nothing is hidden becomes in turn the jaded visibility of what refuses to be known, the anonymity of nothingness. If death as an end to a life has been overcome, death as implicit *in* life hasn’t.

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