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Wandering about – Religion. Houellebecq's *Soumission* and Sansal's *2084. The End of the World*

Boualem Sansal's novel *2084. La fin du monde* was published in 2015, in the same year Houellebecq's novel *Soumission* came out. Both novels use migration as a metaphor and depict a world dominated by religion. In both cases, it is difficult to give a clear-cut definition whether a dys- or utopian world lies ahead of us. *Soumission* envisions a Muslim France in the year 2022. The novel's ironic framework functions in a way that the reader remains insubmissive. *2084*, on the other hand, reinvisions Orwell's *1984*. In a not so distant future, religion, politics, and humanism have come to a halt and nearly to an end, but the protagonist keeps wandering about. Both works construct (literary) fiction as both the culprit and the saviour and are highly political as every day's events contribute to their political relevance and highlight their socio-analytical value.

La littérature n'est pas censée être optimiste, délivrer des messages d'espoir, faire en sorte que les gens aiment la vie; dans ce sens, elle est très différente de la propagande.<sup>1</sup>

(Literature does not have to be optimistic, to give hopeful messages, to make people appreciate life; in that sense, literature differs greatly from propaganda. [my translation])

Houellebecq's breakthrough as an author was his *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998) which became a cult book, was adapted to the stage and made into a movie (2006, Oskar Roehler). Exactly in the centre of the novel, we find an extensive passage that deals with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Both brothers, the protagonists Bruno and Michel, interpret the novel as a utopian description of a world of (post-) human happiness. Their discussion can be read as a precursor to both Houellebecq's later novel *Soumission* and to Sansal's *2084*.

Bruno arriva vers vingt et une heures, il avait déjà un peu bu et souhaitait aborder des sujets théoriques. « J'ai toujours été frappé, commença-t-il avant même de s'être assis, par l'extraordinaire justesse des prédictions faites par Aldous Huxley dans *Le Meilleur des mondes*. Quand on pense que ce livre a été écrit en 1932, c'est hallucinant. Depuis, la société occidentale a constamment tenté de se rapprocher de ce modèle. [...] Je sais bien, continua Bruno avec un mouvement de la main comme pour balayer une objection que Michel n'avait pas faite, qu'on décrit en général l'univers d'Huxley comme un cauchemar totalitaire, qu'on essaie de faire passer ce livre pour une dénonciation virulente ; c'est une hypocrisie pure et simple. Sur tous les points - contrôle génétique, liberté sexuelle, lutte contre le vieillissement, civilisation des loisirs, *Brave New World* est pour nous un paradis, c'est en fait exactement le monde que nous essayons, jusqu'à présent sans succès, d'atteindre. [...] Et, le premier parmi les écrivains, y compris parmi les écrivains de science-fiction, il a compris qu'après la physique c'était maintenant la biologie qui allait jouer un rôle moteur. »<sup>2</sup>

(When Bruno arrived at about nine o'clock, he had already had a couple of drinks and was eager to talk philosophy. "I've always been struck by how accurate Huxley was in *Brave New World*," he began before he'd even sat down. "It's phenomenal when you think he wrote it in 1932. Everything that's happened since simply brings Western society closer to the social model he described. [...] Everyone says *Brave New World* is supposed to be a totalitarian nightmare, a vicious indictment of society, but that's hypocritical bullshit. *Brave New World* is our idea of heaven: genetic manipulation, sexual liberation, the war against aging, the leisure society. This is precisely the world that we have tried – and so far failed – to create. [...] He may have lacked style or finesse or psychological insight, but that's insignificant compared with the accuracy of the original

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Houellebecq, "C'est ainsi que je fabrique mes livres": Un entretien avec Frédéric Martel, in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, 548 (1999), pp.197-209 (p.201).

<sup>2</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *Les particules élémentaires* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), pp.156-158.

concept. Huxley was the first writer to realize that biology would take over from physics as the driving force of society – long before other sci-fi writers.”<sup>3</sup>

Houellebecq and Sansal write sci-fi novels that are ambivalent in their u- and dystopian treatment of Western society. In a similar way, they envision (more or less) totalitarian nightmares and are both *romans à thèse*. At the same time, they introduce religion as the paradigmatic force that holds societies together. In a self-ironic way, it can be said of both works that they “lack[] style or finesse”, a shortcoming which realigns itself with the overall ironic narrative framework.<sup>4</sup> It will be discussed how *Soumission* (I) and *2084* (II) depict the role of (the Muslim) religion in the near future. Whereas Houellebecq’s novel imagines an Islamic renewal and reconfiguration of Europe, Sansal’s novel conceptualises a pan-Islamist totalitarian state. Of special interest will be the ways in which dystopic elements are meta-fictionally undermined, migration and peregrination function as metaphors, and both the reader and respective first-person narrators ultimately remain *insoumis*, i.e. insubmissive.

### I *Soumission*

A university professor in his 40’s is forced to find interest in something else than his „andropause“<sup>5</sup>, his libido decreases continuously, or in his microwave dishes. This change or conversion in his life comes about when, in 2022, an election campaign dominates France. It all comes down to a duel between a moderate Muslim party and the „frontistes“, led by Marine Le Pen. The „Fraternité musulmane“ gets elected in the end and the protagonist, not really unhinged by what is going on, considers converting to Islam. Before, François had been haunted by the idea of becoming a catholic, an idea implemented into his way of thinking about life by his dissertation thesis which he wrote on Joris-Karl Huysmans who himself went from the idea of the beautiful to that of Christ.

Oui, oui, on peut parler de haine. [...] Et la religion la plus con, c’est quand même l’islam. Quand on lit le Coran, on est effondré... effondré.

(Yes, yes, we can call it hate. [...] And the dumbest religion is still Islam. When one reads the Coran, one is shocked... shocked.)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *The Elementary Particles*, trans. by Frank Winne (London: Vintage, 2001), pp.186-188.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Sabine Hillen, *le roman français de Sartre à Houellebecq* (Caen: lettres modernes Minard, 2007), pp. 128–132 [chap. “un auteur sans style”], Lena Schönwälder, *Schockästhetik: Von der Ecole du mal über die letteratura pulp bis Michel Houellebecq* (Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 2018), p.217f., Roger Célestin, ‘Du style, du plat, de Proust et de Houellebecq’, in *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, ed. by Murielle Lucie Clément and Sabine van Wesemael (Amsterdam/New York: Faux titre, 2007), pp.345-356.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *Soumission* (Paris: Flammarion, 2015), p.25. In what follows, references to that edition will be abbreviated in the continuous text as *S*, followed by the English translation: Michel Houellebecq, *Submission*, trans. by Lorin Stein (London: Vintage, 2016). Likewise, quotations from Sansal’s *2084* will be quoted as *F* (=La *Fin* du monde), Boualem Sansal, *2084. La fin du monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015), followed by the given page number and that of the translation: Boualem Sansal, *2084. The End of the World*, trans. by Alison Anderson (New York: Europa Editions, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Didier Sénécals, ‘Interview avec Michel Houellebecq’, in *Lire: Magazine Littéraire*, September (2001), pp.28-38. (p.33). Cf. Julia Encke, *Wer ist Michel Houellebecq? Porträt eines Provokateurs* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2018), p.95.

That famous interview he had in 2001 with the *L'Express* magazine *Lire* is one of many that gave rise to a reputation: Houellebecq is a controversial author, a public figure sometimes called an Islamophobic racist, and often considered to hold incorrect political positions. The publication of his latest book coincided with the terror attacks in Paris and the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting on 7 January 2015, which contributed to *Soumission* being a bestselling novel all over Europe, especially in Belgium, France, and Germany.<sup>7</sup> That success and notorious fame contributed to Houellebecq's pleasure and *ennui* to insist on the fact that his book is not Islamophobic.

It is a commonly held opinion that Houellebecq is an author largely influenced by Zola, by French naturalism and realism. Especially in his first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* from 1994 - in English the title is translated as *Whatever* - he adopts socio-biological and hereditary discourses, by describing the stupidity, mediocrity and alienation of everyday life: the effacement of human relations, the emptiness and uselessness of tertiary jobs, and the ideology of liberalism. For a long time, Houellebecq has been considered a scandalous author. At the same time, his dystopian imagination makes the reader feel a great deal of actuality, embeddedness in today's world, authenticity even. One could even speak of a proper *effet de réel* (houellebecquien) or *effect of the real*, to take Roland Barthes' expression.<sup>8</sup>

From the beginning, *Soumission* invokes the act of reading as the quintessential humanist project.

Il avait entretemps [jusqu'à 1898] trouvé le moyen d'écrire différents livres qui m'avaient fait, à plus d'un siècle de distance, le considérer comme un ami. [...] La spécificité de la littérature, *art majeur* d'un Occident qui sous nos yeux se termine, n'est pourtant pas bien difficile à définir. [...] [S]eule la littérature peut vous donner cette sensation de contact avec un autre esprit humain [...] (S 12f.)

(In that time [until 1898] he had managed to write books that made me consider him a friend more than a hundred years later. [...] [T]he special thing about literature, the *major art form* of a Western civilisation now ending before our very eyes, is not hard to define. [...] [O]nly literature can put you in touch with another human spirit [...] [S 6])

André Breton wrote that Huysmans is surrealist in pessimism ("Huysmans est un surréaliste dans le pessimisme") and *Soumission* invites us to take a humorous attitude. The protagonist, François, considers Huysmans, the famous decadence writer and last literary dandy in France, a friend

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<sup>7</sup> Agnieszka Komorowska, "Mais c'est une ambiguïté étrange": Die Rezeption von Michel Houellebecqs Roman *Soumission* in Frankreich und Deutschland, in *Romanische Studien*, 3, (2016) (<http://www.romanischestudien.de/index.php/rst/article/view/116>).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Roland Barthes, 'L'effet de réel', in *Communications*, 11 (1968), pp.84-89.

<sup>9</sup> André Breton, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Marguerite Bonnet (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), II, p.239 [Qu'est-ce que le surréalisme?].

because of his books, that writer of literature, which is the major art form of a Western civilisation now ending before our very eyes.

[U]n auteur c'est avant tout un être humain, présent dans ses livres, qu'il écrive très bien ou très mal en définitive importe peu [...]. De même, un livre qu'on aime, c'est avant tout un livre dont on aime l'auteur, qu'on a envie de retrouver, avec lequel on a envie de passer ses journées. (S 13f.)

([A]n author is above all a human being, present in his books, and whether he writes very well or very badly hardly matters [...]. In the same way, to love a book is, above all, to love its author: we want to meet him again, we want to spend our days with him. [S 7])

The protagonist and the French Republic *submit* to a new state religion, but that submission starts off as a conversation with a friend, with an author, which is, above all, a human being. These passages, taken from the first chapter, allude to that old humanist idea that books are fat letters, sent from friend to friend, from the past to the present.<sup>10</sup> The second chapter of the fourth part offers a response to the question what role an intellectual in today's society might have, and indirectly how the novel itself places its own value. After his return to Paris, François is astonished to receive a letter signed by the president of Sorbonne university, Robert Rediger, informing him that his pension will be considerable, given the Saudi-Arabian and Wahhabi cash injection.<sup>11</sup> The protagonist's ironic comment reads as follows: "[I]ls croyaient encore au pouvoir de l'élite intellectuelle, c'en était presque touchant." (S 179) ("They still believed, deep down, in the power of the intellectual elite. It was almost touching." [S 149]) Intellectuals are being bought and their role in society is less than even marginal. In his study *The end of the French intellectual?*, the Israeli historian Shlomo Sand writes: "*Submission* is one of the most manifestly Islamophobic books published in France so far this century."<sup>12</sup> He talks about the novel's "capacity to shock" (ibid.), its xenophobia, and racism. But such a generalizing judgment neglects the novel's narrative and ironic structure. Having no omniscient narrator who could judge the fictional world, *Submission* reinvents the famous impartiality of Flaubert's narrator whose ideal is that the author has to be "comme Dieu dans l'univers, présent partout et visible nulle part."<sup>13</sup> ("like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere.").

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism', in *Basic Writings from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, rev. by David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1992), pp.213-266.

<sup>11</sup> "L'université islamique de Paris-Sorbonne s'engageait à me verser dès maintenant une pension de retraite dont le montant mensuel serait indexé sur l'inflation, et s'élevait à ce jour à 3 472 euros. Je pouvais prendre rendez-vous avec les services administratifs afin d'accomplir les démarches nécessaires." (S 178) ("the Islamic University of Paris-Sorbonne could offer me a pension, effective immediately, at a starting monthly rate of 3,472 euros, to be adjusted for inflation." [S 148]).

<sup>12</sup> Shlomo Sand, *The End of the French Intellectual: From Zola to Houellebecq*, trans. by David Fernbach (Verso: e-book [EPUB]). 2018. (Part Two *Islamophobia and the Intellectuals* 'Rhinoceritis', Chapter 6 *From Houellebecq to Charlie Hebdo: Submission or Humour* [paragraph 19]).

<sup>13</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance: Juillet 1851-1858*, ed. by Jean Bruneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), p.204 (Letter to Louise Colet [December 9, 1852]).

Houellebecq's narrator seeks to produce the same effect of impassibility and impersonality, but by inverse means. *Submission* blurs the line between author and narrator. One of these strategies are the rather schematic analogies: The decadence of France corresponds to that of François. He is an expert on the great literary decadent Huysmans who converted to Catholicism like his protagonist Durtal in *En route* (1895). Another strategy can be found in the way Houellebecq plays the public and the media, his self-marketing and self-fashioning can be compared to a passage that reads like a self-commentary: “l’humour de Huysmans présente le cas unique d’un humour généreux [...], qui invite le lecteur à se moquer par avance de l’auteur, de l’excès de ses descriptions plaintives, atroces ou risibles.” (S. 15) (“Huysmans’ sense of humour is uniquely generous [...], inviting us to laugh at him, and his overly plaintive, awful or ludicrous descriptions” [S 8]).

The blending of self-mockery and self-commentary goes further than that. The identification with Huysmans is explicit: “Ma vie en somme continuait, par son uniformité et sa platitude prévisibles, à ressembler à celle de Huysmans un siècle et demi plus tôt.” (S 18) (“Which meant that my boring, predictable life continued to resemble Huysmans’ a century and a half before.” [S 11]). François’ relation to literature is mirrored by his sex-life. He speaks of a “model of amorous behaviour”, of the “complete idiocy of this model” according to which “[t]hese [old] relationships followed a fairly regular pattern.” (S. 11-12)<sup>14</sup>. But not only his literary and psychological mindset are dominated by repetition and decadence, as well as his sexual habits, but also French politics. François analyses that a similar impasse dictates French politics, a certain determinism according to which “ça va faire comme en 2017, le Front national sera au second tour et la gauche sera réélue” (S 36) (“It will be just like 2017, the National Front will make it into the run-offs and the left will be voted back in.” [S. 26]). It’s “un phénomène d’*alternance politique*” (S 50) (“the phenomenon of *democratic change*”[S. 40]) which, in 2022, no longer holds, when a new, third possibility emerges the *Fraternité musulmane*, which allows the French voters to find a way around Scylla and Charybdis. In a different manner, Emmanuel Macron’s movement *En Marche* has proven in 2017 the French electorate’s wish for a such a third option.

Furthermore, to make this outline more plausible, *Submission* implicitly uses two master narratives or two main ideas that equally blur the boundary between author and narrator.<sup>15</sup> In 2003, Houellebecq writes an illuminating preface to a book on the actuality of Auguste Comte’s thoughts and writings. The way Houellebecq opens his essay on Comte’s antimodern thought is applicable to both himself as an author and to his *alter ego* François: “Tout, dans la pensée politique et morale d’Auguste Comte, semble fait pour exaspérer le lecteur contemporain [...]” (“Everything in the

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. “Les [anciennes] relations amoureuses se déroulèrent suivant un schéma relativement immuable.”, “le modèle amoureux”, “la parfaite inanité de ce schéma” (S 19-21).

<sup>15</sup> The second ironic framework, Huysmans’ idea to write a disappointing, even dull book, will be discussed next.

political and moral thought of Comte seems to have been made in order to exasperate the contemporary reader [...]”<sup>16</sup> Comte’s idea that there is a linear progress in history which eventually leads humanity to a rational, scientific and positivistic way of living is undermined by the conviction that the social contract of enlightened citizens, and democracy as well, is nothing but a silly idea. How then to prevent a *bellum omnium contra omnes*, a war of all against all, how to found the social world? One possible answer is religion, which could function as a remedy against and as a replacement for liberalism and individualism. It’s precisely the possibility of a renewal of religious times, due to that desire for immortality that is written in our flesh, that current Western societies endow, that might break with *La loi des trois états Law of Three Stages*, which, according to Comte, leads humanity progressively from Theology, to Metaphysics, and finally to Positivism.<sup>17</sup>

In a grotesque way, the novel readopts that theory, the “retour du religieux” (S 109) (“return to religion“ [S. 88]), the idea being that mankind will, even must, fall back to a former stage of development: On the first ballot and in response to Ben Abbes, the leader of the Muslim party, Marine Le Pen refers explicitly to Condorcet who

évoque ces Égyptiens, ces Indiens « chez qui l’esprit humain fit tant de progrès, et qui retombèrent dans l’abrutissement de la plus honteuse ignorance, au moment que la puissance religieuse s’empara du droit d’instruire les hommes ». (S 110)

(evoked the ancient Egyptians and Indians ‘among whom the human spirit made such progress, and who fell back into the most brutal and shameful ignorance the moment that religious power assumed the right to educate men’. [S. 90])

Besides the conversion to Islam, Ben Abbes and his enlightened and moderate government have the vision of a different submission, of a new European empire that, according to François, is a renewal of an old idea taken from the Classical age: “il [=Ben Abbes] a une idée de l’Europe, un véritable projet de civilisation. Son modèle ultime, au fond, c’est l’empereur Auguste; ce n’est pas un modèle médiocre.” (S 160) (“For him [=Ben Abbes] Europe is truly a project of civilisation. Ultimately, he models himself on the emperor Augustus - and that’s some model.” (S. 130f.)). Rediger, director of the Sorbonne, goes as far as to liken Ben Abbes to a political genius, comparable to Napoleon, on the question of integration, global politics and religion.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Michel Houellebecq, ‘Préliminaires au positivisme’, in *Auguste Comte aujourd’hui*, ed. by Michel Bourdeau and others (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 2003), pp.7-12 (p.7).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Michel Bourdeau, ‘Le Comte est bon’, in *Cahiers de L’Herne* (2017) (<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01402847>) and George Chabert, ‘Michel Houellebecq: Lecteur d’Auguste Comte’, in *Revue Romane*, 37 (2002), pp.187-204.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. “« [...] À part l’Empire romain je ne vois guère que l’Empire ottoman, sur une échelle plus restreinte. Napoléon aurait sans doute eu les qualités nécessaires - sa gestion du dossier israélite est remarquable, et il a montré au cours de l’expédition d’Égypte qu’il était parfaitement capable, aussi, de traiter avec l’islam. Ben Abbes, oui... Il se peut que Ben Abbes soit de la même trempe... »” (S 289) (““ [...] Aside from the Roman Empire, only the Ottomans really managed

Notably, that's also an idea that Giorgio Agamben famously promoted in 2013 as a new Latin empire against Germany's predominance. His provocative article "Se un impero latino prendesse forma nel cuore d'Europa" ("If a Latin empire were formed in the heart of Europe") was published on March 15 in *La Repubblica*, and then quickly translated into French under the even more aggressive title "Que l'Empire latin contre-attaque!", and published simultaneously in *Libération* and *La Repubblica* on March 24. At the height of the European debt crisis, Agamben renews an idea developed by Alexandre Kojève in *L'empire latin* from 1945, and in a similar way Houellecq's *Soumission* a new Augustan empire that would replace today's European Union and its Christian values.

When François, in the beginning, remarks that "[o]bviously, it's not easy for an atheist to talk about a series of books whose main subject is religious conversion." (S 39)<sup>19</sup>, it is Huysmans, as a literary trope, who mirrors the necessity of social cohesion founded in religion, especially when, in a near-distant future, historical and cultural heritage no longer ensures societal cohesion.

Whereas the Islamization of French public life is established without much resistance or obstacles, the protagonist keeps a hidden agenda and a deadpan humour: François, like his literary hero Huysmans, goes on a pilgrimage to Rocamadour, into *la France profonde*, and, Christian art, especially the Black Virgin, site of many Medieval pilgrimages and acts of repentance, no longer assures any sense of identity: "C'était une statue étrange, qui témoignait d'un univers entièrement disparu. La Vierge était assise très droite [...]" (S 166) ("It was a strange statue. It bore witness to a vanished universe. The Virgin sat rigidly erect [...]" [S 135]). In analogy, the reference to "Charles Martel [qui] a battu les Arabes à Poitiers en 732, donnant un coup d'arrêt à l'expansion musulmane vers le Nord. C'est en effet une bataille décisive, qui marque le vrai début de la chrétienté médiévale [...]" (S 148) ("Charles Martel - Charles the Hammer - [who] fought the Arabs at Poitiers in 732, ending Muslim expansion to the north. That was a decisive battle, it marks the real beginning of the Christian Middle Ages." [S 121]) is now nothing but a meagre, historical recollection.

The other master-narrative taken up, as well ironically, is that of an "impasse" (S 49) that Huysmans allegedly experienced after having written *Against the Grain* (1884). The author-narrator speaks of that novel as "the obvious problem was what to do with *À rebours*. Once you've written a book of such powerful originality, unrivalled even today in all of literature, how do you go on writing?". And, as a result: "After a book like that, Huysmans had no choice but to part ways with

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it, on a smaller scale. Napoleon could have done it. His handling of the Israelite question was remarkable, and during his Egyptian expedition he showed that he could deal with Islam, too. Ben Abbas, yes ... you could say he was cut from the same cloth." [S 242]).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. „Il n'est évidemment pas facile, pour un athée, de parler d'une suite de livres ayant pour sujet principal une conversion [...]" (S 49).

Naturalism.” (S 38, 28)<sup>20</sup> Like Huysmans, Houellebecq invents “un personnage central, porte-parole de l’auteur” (S 49) (“a main character, an authorial stand-in” [S 38]) whose development is at the centre of his novels. In his novels, the protagonists’ names may change but they obviously share character traits with the author’s self-staging, they age ~~with him and repeat what is said in interviews.~~

What François says about *En rade* (1887; *Becalmed*) can be seen as a hidden self-description: “il est vrai que des Esseintes, psychologiquement, reste le même de la première à la dernière page, que rien ne se passe et ne peut même se passer dans ce livre, que l’action y est, en un sens, nulle” (S 38) (“it is true that, psychologically, Jean des Esseintes remains unchanged from the first page to the last; that nothing happens, or can happen, in the book; that it has, in a sense, no plot.” [S 28]). That is realized with “a stroke of genius on Huysmans’ part: to recount, in a book bound to be disappointing, the story of a disappointment. The coherence between subject and treatment makes an aesthetic whole. It gets pretty boring, yes, but you keep reading [...]” (S 38)<sup>21</sup> What better way of saying: What I am writing is genius and boring at the same time.

*Submission* can also be considered such a disappointing novel, as it follows *La carte et le territoire*, which received the prix Goncourt in 2010, a “livre sur rien”<sup>22</sup>, a book about nothing, with Flaubert’s expression, because France and its intelligentsia do not defend, as one would expect, those values and ideals which Europe embodies, at least from an optimist’s perspective. Of course, Houellebecq has never been an engaged author. As a defence, four days after its publication, the professor whom Houellebecq thanks in the appendix for inside-academia-information writes in an article on *Soumission*, which states that it “clearly highlights an author who really is absent. So it’s actually up to the reader to think, to assume his responsibility. Nothing allows him to easily discard his conscience. Nothing, no authority: He remains, against his will, insubmissive.”<sup>23</sup> François’ failed trip to Rocamadour mirrors in a way the *in*submission of the reader and, at the same time, the protagonist’s inner migration and political apathy. In the prominent last chapter of *Soumission*, this ambivalence is repeated grammatically: The use of the conditional indicates how the protagonist imagines his conversion would, might or could be.

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. “le problème se posait évidemment avec une acuité particulière en ce qui concerne *À rebours*. Comment, lorsqu’on a écrit un livre d’une originalité aussi puissante, qui demeure inouï dans la littérature universelle, comment peut-on continuer à écrire ?” (S 48), “Huysmans ne pouvait plus, après un tel livre, être un naturaliste [...]” (S 38f.)

<sup>21</sup> “[C]’est que l’auteur a eu cette idée brillante : raconter, dans un livre condamné à être décevant, l’histoire d’une déception. Ainsi, la cohérence entre le sujet et son traitement emporte l’adhésion esthétique, bref on s’ennuie un peu mais on continue à lire” (S 48).

<sup>22</sup> Flaubert, p.31 (to Louise Colet [16 January 1852]).

<sup>23</sup> “Ostentatoirement mis en scène, l’auteur, en réalité, s’absente. Le lecteur, au contraire, sera sommé de réfléchir, de prendre ses responsabilités. Rien ne lui permettra d’aliéner à peu de frais sa propre conscience. Rien, nulle autorité : il restera, malgré lui, insoumis.” (Agathe Novak-Lechevalier, ‘Soumission, la littérature comme résistance’, in *Libération*, 1 March 2015).



The conversion ceremony itself would be very simple. Most likely it would take place at the Paris Mosque [...]. Testify that there is no God but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God. And then it would be over; from then on I'd be a Muslim. [...] I would have nothing to mourn. (S 248-250)<sup>24</sup>

The novel ends indeterminately and closes with an obvious pun on Edith Piaf's famous "Je ne regrette rien". But this time, not as a statement on the past, but as a comment on a possible future that has not come yet.

## II 2084. *La fin du monde*

Boualem Sansal's novel *2084* won the *Grand prix du roman de l'Académie française* and was nominated *Meilleur livre de l'année* (2015) by the magazine *Lire*. Sansal received the *Peace Prize of the German Book Trade* in 2011. Sansal's *2084* imagines a theocracy without borders, a world without end, which is its end, as the subtitle suggests.

Sansal's novel *2084* was published in the same year as *Submission*. There are obvious parallels to Houellebecq's novel. *2084* equally paints a dystopian future. The main conflict is that between religion and humanism, as the novel's motto points out: "La religion fait peut-être aimer Dieu mais rien n'est plus fort qu'elle pour faire détester l'homme et haïr l'humanité." (F 9) ("Religion might make us love God but there is nothing stronger than religion to make us despise man and hate humankind." [F 9]) The tone of the novel is ironic in a comparable manner, as the "Warning" to the reader exemplifies,<sup>25</sup> but the narrative stance is different and contains frequent passages of *free indirect speech* which are often italicized.<sup>26</sup> *2084* presents a plot and a world that are similarly boring in comparison to *Soumission*, which is mainly due to the fact that Sansal's novel is also a *roman à thèse* and quite schematic: The rewriting of Orwell's novel *1984* is obvious, especially on the first and last pages. Both authors are badly received in their native countries, respectively France and Algeria.

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. "La cérémonie de la conversion, en elle-même, serait très simple ; elle se déroulerait probablement à la Grande mosquée de Paris, [...]. Dans la matinée le hammam me serait spécialement ouvert, il était d'ordinaire fermé aux hommes [...]. « Je témoigne qu'il n'y a d'autre divinité que Dieu, et que Mahomet est l'envoyé de Dieu. » Et puis ce serait fini ; je serais, dorénavant, un musulman. La réception à la Sorbonne serait beaucoup plus longue. [...] Je n'aurais rien à regretter." (S 297-300).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. "C'est une œuvre de pure invention, le monde de Bigaye que je décris dans ces pages n'existe pas et n'a aucune raison d'exister à l'avenir, tout comme le monde de Big Brother imaginé par maître Orwell, et si merveilleusement conté dans son livre blanc 1984 n'existait pas en son temps, n'existe pas dans le nôtre et n'a réellement aucune raison d'exister dans le futur. Dormez tranquilles, bonnes gens, tout est parfaitement faux et le reste est sous contrôle." (F 11) ("This is a work of pure invention: the world of Bigaye that I describe in these pages does not exist and has no reason to exist in the future, just as the world of Big Brother imagined by George Orwell, and so marvelously depicted in his novel 1984, did not exist in his time, does not exist in our own, and truly has no reason to exist in the future. Sleep soundly, good people, everything is sheer falsehood, and the rest is under control." [F 11]).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. "Leurs pensées s'entendaient de loin tant elles battaient fort dans leurs têtes. La route interdite !... la frontière !... Quelle frontière, quelle route interdite ? Notre monde n'est-il pas la totalité du monde ? Ne sommes-nous pas chez nous partout, par la grâce de Yölah et d'Abi ? Qu'a-t-on besoin de bornes ? Qui y comprend quelque chose?" (F 35) ("Their thoughts could be heard from afar, so noisily were they pounding in their heads. The forbidden road! ... the border! ... What border, what forbidden road? Isn't our world the entire world? Aren't we at home wherever we go, by the grace of Yölah and Abi? What need have we of boundaries? What are we to make of this?" [F 33]).

Houellebecq's novels are widely appreciated in Germany though, and Sansal's novels are praised in France. The publication of both novels has somewhat coincided with terror attacks, *Soumission* came out on the day the *Charlie Hebdo attacks* happened in Paris. *2084* in turn has been read as an apocalyptic prophecy of 13 November 2015, the attacks in the *Stade de France* and *Bataclan* in Paris.

Time has (been) stopped, the year 2084 has become eternal. Likewise, space has become limitless, there is one country, Abistan. That there is a border to this theocracy and to this state is a myth itself, one to which the protagonist, Ati, seeks to find that separating line; so he wanders about. There is one religion, the entire population is being controlled by disinformation, ignorance and propaganda. People do not trust their own thoughts as the secret police controls thoughts and reads minds. Language or *abilang* is being manipulated, there is one imaginary enemy and that fear legitimizes repression. The novel clearly is a retake on Orwell's *1984*, the major difference is that the regime is not a socialist one (Ingsoc) but a religious one, led by Abi, earthly delegate of God, Yölah. There is but one party, la *Juste Fraternité* or *Just Brotherhood*, which – lucky coincidence – sounds similar to the *Fraternité musulmane* in Houellebecq's novel. Sansal has a clear message: Politically, Islam tends to be Islamism. That moral simplicity is already present in *Le village de l'Allemand* (2008; *The German Mujahid*) and in *Gouverner au nom d'Allah* (2013).

A giant telepathic device controls thoughts, there is one book with eternal rules that controls the past and the futur, the holy Gkabal, for Abi's followers "Yölah is great, and Abi is his faithful Delegate." (F 17) In this world, *abilang* has been sanctified and has replaced all former languages, it's "the omnipotent and exclusive national language." (F 89).<sup>27</sup> A long and patient description of the mechanics of control opens the novel, but there is more to it, the reader is invited to reflect, to deconstruct those concepts that dominate our systems of thought, since, at least, the 19th century: What do the notions of "nation", "identity" and "border" still mean? It is hard to read *2084* without thinking about our present day democracies, about the instrumentalization of fears, the promotion of ignorance, the newspeak of today's media, binary logics and the production of scapegoats. *2084* does more than denounce Islamization, it's a warning to all democracies, because Abistan is a world in which binary thinking has been abolished in a nightmarish way: Occident and Orient, religion and laicism, believers and non-believers have become meaningless distinctions. As in Houellebecq's novel, in the end, the reader can identify with Ati, who surpasses borders.

The plot itself is secondary and not very interesting. The protagonist stumbles upon a strange secret in a chance encounter with an archaeologist. A recent excavation, the archaeologist

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. "Yölah est grand et Abi est son fidèle Délégué." (F 17), "le mystère de l'*abilang*, la langue sacrée, née avec le saint Livre d'Abi et devenue langue nationale exclusive omnipotente." (F 94)

tells him, has cast doubt on the regime's official version of history. This seed of doubt makes him curious and Ati goes on a journey of truth but does not intent to subvert the regime or the religion. At the end of the novel, the three famous slogans of 1984 are first repeated and then modified in an absurd way:

Nos chefs d'alors prirent pour base de leur philosophie les trois principes qui ont présidé à la création du système politique de l'Angsoc : "La guerre c'est la paix", "la liberté c'est l'esclavage", "L'ignorance c'est la force" ; ils ont ajouté trois principes de leur cru : "La mort c'est la vie", "Le mensonge c'est la vérité", "La logique c'est l'absurde". C'est ça l'Abistan, une vraie folie. (F 260)

(So as the basis of their philosophy our leaders adopted the three principles that presided over the creation of Angsoc's political system: 'War is peace,' 'Freedom is slavery,' 'Ignorance is strength,' and added three principles of their own: 'Death is life,' 'Lying is truth,' 'Logic is absurdity.' That's Abistan for you, sheer madness. [F 240])

In Orwell's novel, these slogans are written on the outside walls of the Ministry of Truth, they are shown at the end of the *Two Minutes Hate*, and they figure on the 25ct-coins. The last one is an obvious negation of Francis Bacon's "Nam et ipsa scientia potestas est" ("For knowledge itself is power") from his *Meditationes sacrae* (1597). This excerpt, taken from the last page of the *proper* story, which is followed by an epilogue, exemplifies an obvious character trait of the novel: Sansal tries to surpass Orwell's dystopian novel explicitly throughout, as the second and third slogans exemplify, but also implicitly because the government of Abistan, Abigov, actually makes people believe it alone possessed the truth.

The all-pervasive talk about borders represents the repressive quality of religion and at the same time both the hope and fear to escape. At the sanatorium, there is a great upheaval when a caravan disappears, and no one knows where to, which unsettles the community:

La nouvelle jetait le sanatorium dans la stupeur et l'abattement, des hommes se flagellaient selon la coutume de leur région, on se cognait la tête contre le mur, on se lacérait la poitrine, on hurlait à la mort : cet acte était une hérésie qui ruinerait les croyants. Quel monde pouvait-il exister au-delà de cette prétendue frontière ? Y trouverait-on seulement de la lumière et un morceau de terre sur lequel une créature de Dieu pourrait se tenir ? Quel esprit pourrait concevoir le dessein de fuir le royaume de la foi pour le néant ? Le Renégat seul inspirait semblables idées, ou les *makoufs*, les propagandistes de la Grande Mécréance : ils étaient capables de tout. Soudainement, l'événement devenait une affaire d'État et disparaissait de la scène. (F 35f.)

(The news would plunge the sanatorium into stupor and despondency, men flogged themselves in keeping with the tradition of their region, or banged their heads against the wall, or clawed at their chests, or screamed at the top of their lungs: such an act was a heresy that would bring ruin to believers. What world could exist beyond that so-called border? Was there even light there, or a patch of earth where one of God's creatures could stand? What sort of mind could conceive of the intention to flee the kingdom of faith for nothingness? Only the Renegade could inspire such thoughts, or the *makoufs*, the propagandists of the Great Heathendom: they were capable of anything. And suddenly the event became an affair of state, and disappeared from public view. [F 33f.]

This is the first time the word “border” is used, and the last mention of the word can be found in the epilogue “*In which we will hear the latest news from Abistan, sourced from various media: The Voice of the Kūba, [...]. These should be read with the utmost circumspection, as the Abistani media are above all instruments of mental manipulation in the service of the clans.*” (F 241).<sup>28</sup> Ati has become a legend, some sort of holy man, a wanderer, in search of the old culture, a world before the existence of Abistan, the end of the world. An excerpt from a leaflet “tells this little story which sounds like a fairy tale from the mountains:

Mais non, l'hélicoptère n'a fait que tourner ici et là et déposer sur un plateau un homme, chargé de son viatique de haute montagne. Tous les jours qui ont suivi, les gardes l'ont vu, entrevu, aperçu, habillé d'une curieuse façon, disons à l'ancienne, courant ici et là, puis là-bas, comme s'il cherchait quelque chose, une piste perdue, une ruine légendaire, un passage secret, la route interdite peut-être. [...] Les Dru ont finalement conclu que l'homme était venu pour chercher la fameuse Frontière et que, s'il n'était pas mort au fond d'un ravin ou emporté par le torrent, un éboulement, un glissement de terrain, une avalanche, il l'avait peut-être trouvée [...]. Cette histoire de Frontière est des plus étranges. Si la Frontière n'existe pas, et cela est sûr, sa légende, elle, existe et court toujours. Les ancêtres de nos lointains ancêtres en parlaient déjà mais dans nos montagnes au sommet du monde la frontière est ce qui sépare le bien du mal. (F 273f.)

(But no, the helicopter merely circled here and there and eventually left a man off on a plateau; he was carrying mountaineering equipment. Every day thereafter the guards saw him, spotted him, caught a glimpse; he was dressed in a very odd way, shall we say old-fashioned, and he hurried here and there and yonder, as if he were looking for something—a lost trail, a legendary ruin, a secret passage, the forbidden road, perhaps. [...] The Dru villagers finally concluded that the man had gone to look for the famous Border and that if he didn't perish at the bottom of a ravine or wasn't carried away by a mountain torrent or a landslide or an avalanche, maybe he had found the Border; [...]. This story about the Border is as strange as they come. If the Border does not exist, and that is certain, its legend does, and is still growing. The ancestors of our most distant ancestors already talked about it, but in our mountains at the top of the world the border is what separates good from evil. [F 250f.]

The novel comes full circle, with a hint of hope, with a symbolic value given to a mythical pilgrimage and wandering about. Ati has become part of a warning fairy tale, somewhere in between or beyond good and evil. It's up to the reader to decide if he can find borders in the text. One obvious border is that between the more or less omniscient narrator and the author, Boualem Sansal, as the reader is likely to equate them.

The Abistani media's talk about good and evil is as schematic as the novel's meta-narrative negation and condemnation of it. The reader must deal with that ambivalence, is to find a way not to become part of either one of these binary ways of thinking. One of the „the ninety-nine key phrases one learned from earliest childhood, and one recited for the rest of one's life“ reads:

“*Submission is faith and faith is truth.*” (F 39)(“La soumission est foi et la foi vérité” [F 41]).

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. “*Dans lequel on apprendra les dernières nouvelles de l'Abistan. Elles ont été cueillies dans différents médias : La Voix de la Kūba, [...]. Il convient de les prendre avec la plus grande circonspection, les médias abistani sont avant tout des instruments de manipulation mentale au service des clans.*” (F 263)

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