

# The Political Aesthetics of Agricultural Protest in the 21st Century

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## In Search of a Sky to Protect the Earth: Houellebecq's Political Aesthetics Considering *Sérotonine*

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### Abstract:

As an agronomic engineer, it is one of Michel Houellebecq's personal endeavors to protect the environment and foster local and sustainable agriculture. It is therefore no surprise that he stresses the personal and economic disasters of industrial production in nearly all of his novels. Through the example of *Serotonin* (2019), this article will show how Houellebecq proceeds aesthetically through the staging of his characters to defend the cause of the farmers. On the one hand, there is the voice of Aymeric d'Harcourt-Olonde, depicted as a lovely, loyal, and moral friend and a courageous hero with deep historic roots and agricultural ideals, and Camille, Florent's biggest love, shocked by animal husbandry. Both are complementary and embody a premodern state of civilization: medieval times and the 19th century. On the other hand, there is the narrator, Florent, who is uprooted, works for the state economy, and embodies industrial production based on profit. There are two parallel plots by which Houellebecq tries to explain our contemporary decadence: the betrayal of the religion (Camille) and the attempt to get her back during the whole novel, and the decline of the medieval culture as our common roots (Aymeric), which ends in suicide. Through these characters, who are de facto incarnations, the whole parable of serotonin aims at depicting the relationship

between the state and religion through time and its economic and human fallouts. By retracing the sacrifice and tragic fate of the medieval stage of civilization, its pre-industrial mode of production, and Christian culture, Houellebecq aims to arouse awareness among his readers of the necessity of transcendence, which, according to him, can only lead to a fair economic production. Until the very end, Houellebecq aimed at evangelizing the state economy to make it a more moral one (see also Anéantir, 2022) through his parables, which eventually could change society from within. The article will show how agricultural production remains a central aspect of Houellebecq's whole poetics.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Political Literature, Economics and Religion, Transcendence and Social Change

Michel Houellebecq often criticizes industrial farming as in his latest interview with philosopher Michel Onfray (Houellebecq & Onfray, 2022). My thesis in this paper is to argue that Michel Houellebecq shows by the staging of events in *Serotonin*, that the lack of Christianity and the search for an appropriate spiritual shelter also impacts the way the protagonists treat the earth and its operation, meaning agriculture. In fact, we are not more faithful to the earth, as Nietzsche put it, if we abandon the sky, i.e. God. I focused on the inversion of Nietzschean messianism in another article of mine entitled "Recurring Prophets. The inversion of Nietzschean messianism in Michel Houellebecq's The possibility of an island. Throughout *Serotonin* there is a link between the homeless protagonist and his professional failure to protect the local economy. On the contrary the search for a sky seam to go hand in hand with the protection of the land by a sustainable economy. Thus, once again

through concrete events that happened also in reality, Houellebecq manages to link a physical story to the metaphysical (Hi)story of occidental mankind by writing an embodied speech. Therefore, the protagonists are incarnations of more general ideas and discourses. As Gero Faßbeck rightly puts it, Houellebecq's realism is not an imitation of nature, but one of discourses (Faßbeck, 2021, p. 289). Until recently, in his latest novel, *Annihilate* (2022), Houellebecq maintained his endeavor to spread Christianity like the apostle Paulus and to rehabilitate the authority of God, since Paul Raison works aside the state's economy (embodied by a certain Bruno Juge) to regulate it.

In *Serotonin*, the first part is a wandering around of the protagonist Florent-Claude Labrouste, who has no roots, meaning the Christian faith, and who also fails during his lifetime to protect the local agriculture, which he is in charge of at the DRAF ("Direction nationale de l'agriculture et la forêt"). In fact, Florent works for the state, which fails to put in place protective measures to sustain its national economy. Thus, at the very beginning of the novel, Yuzu and Florent are tourists, meaning without spiritual shelter, who stop by various hotels without being able to find a single smoking hotel. The hotels symbolize the transitory shelter of states, and the smoke detector is its monitoring big brother's eye. In the very opening scene of the novel, the transcendence is embodied by an apparition "la châtain d'Al Alquian", that he lets go on the national road, "voied'accès à la nationale" (Houellebecq, 2019, p. 17). From that moment on, as the sacred has migrated to the nation-state, it will be a long, lost journey to find a suitable home. In the first part, the narrator, Florent, is looking for a smoking hotel with a woman who is foreign to him (Yuzu).

After having tried different roofs, one more totalitarian, rationalistic, and hygienic than the other, he undertakes a journey into the past to reconnect with the faith of the 19th century (Camille). The whole first part is thus devoted to the touristic roofs that the nation-states have tried to build since the 19th century. But the climax of the tragedy is the break with the Christian faith

embodied by Camille, that he betrayed in a "frightfully stupid" way with a coloured girl (embodied by Tam) from the British delegation in Brussels. But more, he repeats his betrayal in Paris, in the "Quartier Latin," the very heart of humanistic Europe, where faith this time realizes it. On the one hand, Houellebecq's work tells the individual drama of Florent and Camille, but beyond that, it tells the drama of the white man with his beloved Christianity and his desperate quest for the right words to hold back his betrayed European transcendence.

Mon cerveau travaillait lentement, brumeusement, à chercher une formule [...]. Le lendemain elle continua à pleurer en rassemblant ses affaires, pendant que je me creusai la tête pour trouver une formule adéquate, à vrai dire j'ai passé les deux ou trois années qui suivirent à chercher une formule adéquate, probablement même est-ce que je n'ai jamais cessé de chercher (Houellebecq, 2019, p. 184).

After the expected separation, he goes back in History to tell the reasons that led to the loss of transcendence and eventually the devastating humane consequences we can see through all the novels. It is the story of the aristocrat Aymeric d'Harcourt-Olonde who is depicted as a courageous hero with deep roots and ideals (he is the descendant of Robert d'Harcourt who accompanied Richard Coeur de Lion in his third crusade). "Je me suis dit que c'était bien, quand même, d'avoir des racines" (Ibid, 204). He is a farmer, which in itself is an anti-realistic element of the aesthetics of the writer, because it is not the primary vocation of the aristocracy to be farmers, but it allows the author to link the moral economic behaviour to a medieval state of civilization. Aymeric plays the "good" role and engages in quality dairy production on his farm with a castle inherited from his aristocratic family. Not only does he protest in the name of all the farmers and threaten the police during the farmers' demonstration, but he ends up committing suicide. This demonstration, of which the scale and violence as well as its media fallout, are described in details, is just a paradigmatic example for Houellebecq for the European agricultural policy and the killing of

French production in particular because of the abolition of EU milk quotas. This scene in the novel was often said to refer to the “Gilets jaunes” movement, which took place in France due to the increase in the domestic consumption tax on energy products. The whole staging of events take place at the turn of a not specified new year in the novel, which later turns out to be 1789 (Houellebecq, 2019, p. 269). Therefore, beyond the anecdotic story hides a symbolic counterpart, which is the history of transcendence and its moral fallout. In this case, Aymeric embodies a pre-modern and more precisely a medieval stage of civilization, where people were able to make sacrifices or even to die for their principles (Skagen, 2020, p. 154). He is described as an "aristocrat martyr of the farmer's cause" (Houellebecq, 2019, p. 265) and his suicide also has a moral scope. The state dumbs its prices and forces him into ruin, whereas he resists with the price of his life.

Aymeric is thus the synonym of a moral production which renounces to profit and make sacrifices for a better quality. The fact that he is Florent's best friend shows Michel Houellebecq's sympathy with this way of producing. In much the same way the narrator's love Valérie from *Plateforme* (2000) comes from a farmer's family in Brittany, which had to quit the production, because money does not reward manual work anymore, but is more and more earned by financial speculation. To survive, the premodern must now a fortiori rent standardized bungalows to tourists on his land where the sea (symbol of the divine) has retreated. It is on this dry spiritual ground, left by the Middle-Age, that the sixties and seventies culture will settle. This culture is marked by an absolutism of nature, that doesn't speak to anyone (embodied by a German naturalist). This culture takes the perspective of a toad, worships youth (the young Nathalie) and focuses on sex, homosexuality, and gender.

J'eus du mal lorsqu'elle démarra à reconnaître la chanson, ça ressemblait à un truc disco de la fin des années 1970 ou du début des années 1980, du Corona peut-être, mais la fille réagit bien [...] et c'est là que je commençai vraiment à avoir mal au cœur, pas à cause du contenu mais de la prise de vue, il devait s'être

accroupi pour la prendre en contre-plongée, il devait sautiller autour d'elle comme un vieux crapaud (Houellebecq, 2019, p. 216).

This scene could also remind the time in history when the Church was accused of sexual abuse and paedophilia. After the confession of medieval politics having divorced from his faith, there remains only solitude and a bunch of individual bungalows. The father tries in vain to stay in touch with a spiritual future, but they have nothing to say to each other anymore (Houellebecq, 2019, p. 222). In this situation the narrator cannot do anything for the medieval culture but to witness the decline of a defeated old male. Much like Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Houellebecq makes contemporary social-political events coincide with pivotal moments in the history of thought and transcendence. In *Serotonin* for example, he aligns the difficult situation of the Norman dairy farmers with the situation of France before the French Revolution. The premodernity, like the dairy farmers, is on the verge of bankruptcy as liberalism is taking its toll and transcendence (his wife Cécile) doesn't resist the tough conditions. On the contrary, his faith is seduced by a worldly Anglo-Saxon way of life and doesn't care much for metaphysics. The mistake of the premodern according to the narrator is in having married a faith of its exclusive nobility, which however had no interest and motivation to maintain the medieval heritage. To show the scope of liberalism Houellebecq specifies that Aymeric's father, a traditional aristocrat, maintained the estate with no work, while his son works himself to death to eventually impoverish the family. But before Aymeric's suicide, Florent spends some time with him, and the parable of serotonin shows that what the modern white man learns from the premodern man is to bear his cross. Even if Aymeric himself does not know how to hold his gun anymore because of alcohol, he teaches Florent to carry his cross, a weapon he would have liked to have against the 70s and 80s culture. On the surface, Aymeric teaches Florent how to handle a gun, but in fact, he teaches him the biblical meaning of the cross, as he finds it justified to have only one life, i.e., accepting mortality and the sacrifice it entails. «Tu trou-

veras des mecs zen qui te diront que l'essentiel c'est de ne plus faire qu'un avec sa cible. J'y crois pas c'est des conneries; d'ailleurs, les Japonais sont nuls en tir sportif. [...] moi je trouve que c'est bien, personnellement, d'avoir une seule chance» (Houellebecq, 2019, p. 234). But after having trained for hours, the moment comes when Florent must act himself and fails to sacrifice even an animal. On the medieval philosophical ground, Florent finds the contact of the transcendence that he chases and observes without being able to get back in couple with her because she has a son that he does not know how to sacrifice.

This year 1789, is going to make all shiver, whereas Florent could have lived eternally with his premodern friend by listening to the song Child in time. However, the medieval man fought and organized himself on Sundays to fight in Pont l'Évêque to block and protest against the measures which bled him. But no significant action is done, Florent can only assist as a witness to his loss. The suicide of the farmer finally coincides with the French Revolution itself, since the author inserts a temporal clue by quoting 1789. "Je sentais autour de moi une étranger ambiance dans ce café, presque Ancien Régime, comme si 1789 n'y avait laissé que des traces superficielles, je m'attendais d'un moment à l'autre À ce qu'un paysan évoque Aymeric en l'appelant «notre monsieur» (Ibid, 270). From now on the Church ceases to be a socially structuring institution organizing communion and leaves the protagonists and especially Florent homeless. Florent in fact is in search of Eucharist and first stops at L'hostellerie de la Baie (Ibid, 268), then Chez Maryvonne (with the name Mary in it) where the inhabitants mourn the end of the Ancien regime and their lord Aymeric d'Harcourt-Olonde. The third day he ends in Coutances in a restaurant facing the cathedral, "c'était visiblement the place to be" (Ibid, 270). After the fatal turn of 1789, Florent is in search of the one and only divine love, embodied by Camille. It has been seven (a number that also symbolizes God) years since Florent hasn't seen Camille, and he discovers that she has a son. The son finishes a puzzle of Snow White, which symbolizes leaving death towards life, exile towards the kingdom,

i.e., resurrection (Skagen 2020). However, while trying the ultimate shot that would release him from the wandering in his life, he starts to tremble. Florent fails in accepting to kill the Son on the Cross to join religion and so continues his desperate errancy and the swallowing of the Captorix instead of the Oblate. The communion with transcendence from the 19th century didn't take place and will continue to haunt him until his death. By taking upon himself all the contemporary sins to which the non-sacrifice leads, the author paradoxically enough executes the sacrifice of himself.

Dieu s'occupe de nous en réalité, il pense à nous à chaque instant, et il nous donne des directives parfois très précises. Ces élans d'amour qui affluent dans nos poitrines jusqu'à nous couper le souffle, ces illuminations, ces extases, inexplicables si l'on considère notre nature biologique, notre statut de simples primates, sont des signes extrêmement clairs. [...] Et je comprends, aujourd'hui, le point de vue du Christ, son agacement répété devant l'endurcissement des cœurs. ils ont tous les signes, et ils n'en tiennent pas compte. Est-ce qu'il faut vraiment, en supplément, que je donne ma vie pour ces minables? Est-ce qu'il faut vraiment être, à ce point, explicite ? Il semblerait que oui (Houellebecq, 2019, p. 347).

Houellebecq thus shows that both, human and divine love, are just two sides of the same coin and traces back the history of transcendence to explain how the civilization of the Middle-Age divorced from transcendence (this is Aymeric's story) while at the same time he tries to catch up with the 19th century religion (this is the plot with Camille) through a postmodern narrative. In doing so, he shows how the motive of the cross can have a crucial significance for us today specifically also regarding farming and the economy. The notions of Good Friday, Pentecost, assumption of Mary, resurrection and so on are known without being fully understood by moderns: We vaguely heard about the theological vocabulary, but we cannot assign him a meaning today. The behaviour of the modern is the opposite of the premodern: Florent betrays his women, ideals and himself. He is characterized by lassitude and opportunism, whereas Aymeric stands for his convictions and embodies commitment. The novel begins and ends with the same sentence that describes the Captorix tablet. Thus, the meaning is



inscribed in the form of the novel, which adopts a circular shape. This “form-follows-function” aesthetics is a constant throughout Houellebecq’s work and explains some of its shocking effects. To understand further his aesthetics, we will have a look at *The map and the territory* which is a key novel in that respect. It is the parable that explains why he has been writing in parables and how they are conceived.

Jed consacra sa vie [...] à l’art, à la production de représentations du monde, dans lesquelles cependant les gens ne devaient nullement vivre. Il pouvait de ce fait produire des représentations critiques – critiques dans une certaine mesure, car le mouvement général de l’art comme de la société tout entière portait [...] vers une acceptation du monde [...] (Houellebecq, 2010, p. 37).

As stated Houellebecq aims at criticism through his novels and meets the aesthetic requirements of Marxist literary theory, since he pursues the unity between form and function that Adorno inherited from Hegelian aesthetics (Adorno 1970).

Je sais que cela peut paraître absurde; certains vous diront que le sujet n’a aucune importance, que c’est même ridicule de vouloir faire dépendre le traitement du sujet traité, que la seule chose qui compte est la manière dont le tableau ou la photographie se décompose en figures, en lignes, en couleurs. – Oui, le point de vue formaliste [...] c’est même plus répandu en littérature que dans les arts plastiques, il me semble (Houellebecq, 2010, p. 140).

This “form-follows-function” aesthetics was at the time of its emergence a revolutionary and social one. «C’était en effet une œuvre curieuse. [...] et le traitement avait quelque chose d’ample et d’aérien qui le rapprochait du réalisme socialiste à la chinoise» (Houellebecq 2010, p. 195). It’s a kind of realism, which does not describe reality, but rather enacts it in his fiction (see also Betty, 2016, p. 19). «Vous, je ne sais pas si vous pourriez faire quelque chose, sur le plan littéraire, avec le radiateur, insista Jed. Enfin si, il y a Robbe-Grillet, il aurait simplement décrit le radiateur... Mais, je ne sais pas, je ne trouve pas ça tellement intéressant...» (Houellebecq, 2010, p. 137).

Toute cette accumulation de détails réalistes, censés camper des personnages nettement différenciés, m'est toujours apparue, je m'excuse de le dire, comme pure foutaise. [...] Pour atteindre le but autrement philosophique, que je me propose, il me faudra au contraire élaguer. Simplifier. Détruire un par un une foule de détails. J'y serai d'ailleurs aidé par le simple jeu du mouvement historique. Sous nos yeux, le monde s'uniformise (Houellebecq, 1993, p. 16).

Entirely in line with Nietzschean language and subject critique, which sees language as the great "falsifier" that throws a veil over things through words and is therefore only prejudice and ideology, Houellebecq uses language "actively" or performatively: it has no representative function, rather it executes a reality. This therefore leads to misunderstandings when his novels are read literally or in an all-too-positive way, because the language paradoxically does not say what it means here. With this specific use of language, Houellebecq tries to avoid a well-known problem: how can a linguistic critique of ideology be expressed that would not itself become ideology? His aesthetic decision consists of a performative language that gives priority to the object (reality) over the subject (author), which is therefore a function of reality and, if possible, does not distort it through stylistic devices.

Retour à la peinture, ou à la sculpture, enfin retour à l'objet. [...] A vrai dire je n'ai jamais fait de performance, mais j'ai l'impression d'avoir quelque chose en commun avec ça. D'un tableau à l'autre j'essaie de construire un espace artificiel, symbolique, où je puisse représenter des situations qui aient un sens pour le groupe. – C'est un peu ce qu'essaie de faire le théâtre, aussi. [...] – Ce que je fais, en tout cas, se situe entièrement dans le social (Houellebecq, 1993, p. 145).

The parables are made of symbolic actions that shall make sense to the group. Therefore, the question to ask when reading Houellebecq is rather a theatrical one: what is performed here? As quoted, he doesn't aim at describing but at mystifying Christianity through an actual narrative. As a result, he acts much like an activist to resurrect the Christian symbolism, which makes him a conservative revolutionary or a revolutionary conservative. The meaning of the parables is not stated in assertive sentences but

enacted in his fictions. Eventually, when read in this performative way, Houellebecq's supposed anecdotic stories disclose actually Christian motives in a contemporary story. They thus continue the Christian message, which is the very function of the Son: the word of God made flesh.

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