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THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ISLAND

MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ'S TRAGIC HUMANISM[1]

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ABSTRACT Various authors, including Friedrich Nietzsche and George Steiner, have argued that the tragic worldview, as we find it expressed in Greek tragedy, has become an entirely incomprehensible phenomenon for (post)modern man. The claim defended in this article radically opposes this view. It is argued that tragedy can still teach us something today, and maybe even more so now than in the many intervening centuries that separate us from her days of glory in the fifth century BCE. The tragic reveals itself once more in (post)modern society, and nowhere more clearly than in technology, the domain in which we believed the tragic had been domesticated or even eliminated. Referring to the tragic humanism in Michel Houellebecq's novels *The Elementary Particles* and *The Possibility of an Island* it is argued that it is precisely in (post)modern (bio)technologies that we experience the rebirth of the tragic.

Keywords: tragedy, technology, humanism, transhumanism, Michel Houellebecq, Friedrich Nietzsche

> Mankind is a rope fastened between animal and overman—a rope over an abyss. A dangerous crossing, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking back, a dangerous shuddering and standing still. What is great about human beings is that they are a bridge and not a purpose: what is lovable about human beings is that they are a *crossing over* and a *going under.*
>
> Friedrich Nietzsche

INTRODUCTION

Can the tragic conception of fate still truly tell us something today? Can tragedy still teach us when we turn to her in an attempt to understand the human condition in light of the technological culture that has established itself globally? Or is tragedy doomed to be an echo of a world that has become completely alien for

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(post)modern man? In *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (1872), Nietzsche argues that classical tragedy had become an entirely incomprehensible phenomenon even for Socrates and Plato.[2] Therefore, it is not surprising that George Steiner argues in *The Death of Tragedy* (1961), albeit, just like Nietzsche, with an undertone of regret that the time of tragedy is definitively behind us.[3] In *Tragic Ambiguity. Anthropology, Philosophy and Sophocles' Antigone* (1987), Lardinois and Oudemans also claim that (post)modern man no longer has access to the tragic. It constitutes "a gap in our cosmology, which neither has the power to pass tragedy on nor to eliminate it."[4] The various authors' analyses of how the death of tragedy came about differ in several respects. However, there is one remarkable aspect on which they all agree: they all state that tragedy's death is marked by the transition from *mythos* to *logos*. Tragedy has died from a fatal overdose of technical rationality and optimism.

The thesis I will defend in this article radically opposes this view. My claim is that tragedy can still teach us something today, and maybe even more so now than in the many intervening centuries that separate us from her days of glory in the fifth century BCE.

To be sure, since (post)modern culture differs in many respects from the Greek culture that produced tragedy, what we encounter is inevitably a repetition with a difference. Nietzsche foretold that the rebirth of the tragic[5] would take place in the same mythic-artistic domain in which it was born (at the time he wrote *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*, he considered the Nordic *mythos* of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* to be the ideal cradle). In opposition to Nietzsche, I will argue that in reality the rebirth of tragedy is taking place in "the machine culture," which Nietzsche vehemently rejected because he considered it as being an integral part of the nihilism that characterizes modern culture.[6] The tragic irony is that the tragic worldview reveals itself in the domain in which we believed the tragic had been domesticated or even eliminated: (post)modern technology. It is precisely in (post)modern (bio)technologies that we experience the rebirth of the tragic.[7]

Claiming that technology has become the true locus of tragedy in our (post) modern culture does not mean that art no longer could play a role in the rebirth of the tragic worldview. Probably it is the highest task for contemporary art to reflect on the tragic dimension of technology. A novelist who has done so like no other with a visionary imagination, and who for this reason may be considered one of the most important European writers of the day, is the French author Michel Houellebecq (b. 1958). In the following I will interpret his oeuvre, and more particularly his novel *The Possibility of an Island*, from the perspective of its tragic humanism.

HOUELLEBECQ

He made his debut in 1991 with *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life,* an essayistic study on the work and worldview of this important predecessor of the fantasy genre. In the same year he also published his "cynical poetics" called *To Stay Alive—Method (Rester vivant—method)* (1991; published with other essayistic works in *Rester vivant et autres textes,* 1999). Two other collections of essays appeared in 1998 and 2009, respectively, under the titles *Interventions* and *Interventions 2: Traces.*

As a poet, Houellebecq made his debut with *The Pursuit of Happiness (La Poursuite du bonheur,* 1992), followed by *The Art of Struggle (Le Sens du combat,* 1996) and *Renaissance* (1999). His first novel, *Whatever* (original title: *Extension du domaine de la lutte,* 1994), meant his breakthrough to a wide audience, and it was followed by *The Elementary Particles (Les Particules élémentaires,* 1998), *Lanzarote* (2000), *Platform (Platforme,* 2001), *The Possibility of an Island (La Possibilité d'une île,* 2005) and *Map and Territory* (*La Carte et le Territoire,* 2010). In 2008, letters exchanged between Michel Houellebecq and Bernard-Henri Lévy appeared under the title *Public Enemies: Dueling Writers Take on Each Other and the World* (*Ennemis publics).*

By now, his work has been translated into more than twenty-five languages, and he has given numerous interviews worldwide. However, his work and his polemic stunts for the media are highly controversial. Each of his novels caused a *succès de scandale.* While he has been awarded a number of important prizes for his work, it also invokes strong resistance. Partly, the criticism is the result of his style, which is unpolished and is experienced as flat by some critics. And whoever dislikes the semicolon has got the wrong man in Houellebecq. Also, the fact that Houellebecq alternates fiction with sociological and scientific reflections and very poetical sections in his novels is not to everyone's liking.

But it is especially the content of his work that makes feelings run high. His provocations with respect to, among others, Muslims, feminists, leftist intellectuals and fellow authors (the title to the essay "Jacques Prévert is a prick" is a nice indicator of his tone), have made him a hated man among many of his "target audiences." Because of the politically incorrect fashion in which he discusses themes, critics have claimed that he is a completely immoral author. Add to this his pitch-black worldview, which according to many is entirely nihilistic, and one understands why it took until 2010 before he received the Prix Concourt, the "first prize of French literature." After the publication of *The Elementary Particles,* someone filed a lawsuit against him; due to his reactionary language he was kicked off the editorial board of *Perpendiculaire* magazine; and the large newspaper *Ouest-France* started a boycott against him. After he published *Platform,* he called Islam "a shitty religion" in an interview, and several Muslim and human rights associations filed lawsuits against him. He was found

innocent, but decided to voluntarily banish himself, and he moved to Ireland and later to Spain.

CLOSE TO DESPERATION

On first impression, reading Houellebecq we come across a deeply pessimistic worldview.[8] It is not surprising that in his essays he repeatedly expresses his love for the work of Schopenhauer. Probably due to his background in the natural sciences (Houellebecq was trained as an agricultural engineer and worked as a computer programmer for a number of years) his work often expresses a positivistic worldview, which he combines with a Nietzschean sense of skepticism with respect to morality. The cynical, illusion-free narrative tone of his novels and essays demonstrates a strong affinity with the work of Louis-Ferdinand Céline.

In "Close to Desperation" ("Approches du désarroi" 1993; I cite the extended version dating to 1999 here), it becomes clear that, Houellebecq, following Nietzsche, is of the opinion that after the breakthrough of nihilism it took a while before the message sank in:

> The death of God in the Western world was the beginning of a fantastic metaphysical serial that continues until this day. Every historian of mentality could carefully reconstruct the various phases. In summary we can say that Christianity has pulled off a difficult feat by combining a firm belief in the individual … and the promise of an eternal participation in absolute Being. Once that dream had evaporated, several attempts were made to promise the individual a minimal existence and to reconcile its dream of being with the torturous omnipresence of becoming. Until now all these attempts have come to nothing, and misery is increasingly taking hold.[9]

However, in Houellebecq's view Nietzsche's romantic hope that art might save us from this fate is also an echo of the deceased God. "Salvation through art" is not a realistic alternative. If twentieth-century art can be called tragic at all, it can only be called so because it *fails* in this naive-romantic ambition:

> The development of painting appears to be a model for the development of human communication in modern times, albeit more because of the comparable atmosphere than in a direct connection. In both cases we descend into an unhealthy, artificial, entirely ludicrous sphere, which, because of its ridiculousness is tragic in the end. This is why the average passerby of an art gallery should not linger too long if he wants to maintain his ironic-detached air. After a few minutes and despite his best efforts he will be caught by a certain sense of desperation. He will feel a sense of faintness or discontent at the very least—a worrying delay of his humoristic function. (The tragic appears on stage precisely at the moment when the ridiculous can no longer be considered as *fun*—it is a kind of sudden psychological reversal that points towards the existence of an irrepressible desire for eternity in the individual.)[10]

The condition of music and film is not much rosier. In the age of fast, bite-size entertainment, only traditional literature appears to have a "remarkable robustness," which he explains with reference to the fact that the paper book "can only be relished *slowly*." But that does not mean that Houellebecq hopes for any kind of salvation on the part of literature, other than the fact that it may act as a temporary hideout for what he calls a "cold revolution": a moment of stagnation while falling.

Houellebecq's novels have a very naturalistic tendency, and in that respect they remind us of the works of nineteenth-century authors such as Flaubert, Balzac and Zola. Just like these naturalists, Houellebecq puts characters in scenes that register the times in which they live. The image that arises out of this is utterly depressing. Bart van der Straeten summarizes it as follows:

> They register destruction mostly, they register a time that is ending, the end of a civilization. This destruction is presented as an inevitable process that is determined by sociological and scientific laws. Similar to what we find in naturalistic novels, Houellebecq's prose uses Darwinian determinism as a model of clarification. In the twentieth century, as in the nineteenth, it is still only the fittest that survive. He who is weak, is doomed to be crushed by the strong. In our times this applies especially to the elderly.[11]

While Houellebecq's characters register decay, just like those of the naturalists, there is one important difference: "Realist and naturalist novels sketched the downfall of a *class,* while Houellebecq describes the downfall of all of *humanity.* And perhaps this difference explains the resistance towards Houellebecq's prose."[12]

Even in his early study on Lovecraft—which contains *in nuce* all the elements of his novels still to come—this apocalyptic theme is present. On Lovecraft, he says—although it appears to say as much about Houellebecq himself:

> Few beings have ever been so impregnated, pierced to the core, by the conviction of the absolute futility of human aspiration. The universe is nothing but a furtive arrangement of elementary particles. A figure in transition toward chaos. That is what will finally prevail. The human race will disappear. Other races in turn will appear and disappear. The skies will be glacial and empty, traversed by the feeble light of half-dead stars. These too will disappear. Everything will disappear. And human actions are as free and as stripped of meaning as the unfettered movements of the elementary particles. Good, evil, morality, sentiments? Pure "Victorian fictions." All that exists is egotism. Cold, intact, and radiant.[13]

This apocalyptic and posthumanist scenario only unfolds gradually in Houellebecq's novels. In *Whatever* and *Platform,* in a mixture of cool registration and biting sarcasm, he sketches both an alarming and hilarious image of the liberal market economy in which everything and everyone is for sale. Love and

sex, too, are no more than commodities, goods to be snatched by the highest bidder before the eyes of the losers, who make up the vast majority.[14] *Whatever* tells the story of two computer programmers who are sent into the outback to teach computer classes. The novel discloses the fatal consequences of their aimless journey through the world of economic competition and sexual strife, in which friendship and association are illusions. In *Platform,* the main characters Michel and Valérie transform a rundown holiday resort in Thailand into a professional sex club for sex tourism. The Western world has the money; the Eastern world has the people who are willing to provide pleasure. Valérie is killed in an attack by Muslim terrorists, and Michel is left behind, disillusioned. The novella *Lanzarote* (2000)—which was published originally in a volume that also contained pictures made by the author of the mystical island by the same name—forms the pinnacle of Houellebecq's naturalistic nihilism, in a way. On the cover, we read that the novella is part of the ambitious series of novels *In the Center of the World (Au milieu du monde).* But we can hardly discern any ambition in this novella. It sketches an entirely aimless holiday that has a meeting between a pedophile Belgian man and two German lesbians as its climax. Both the main character and the reader are left behind despairing when it is over.

While consumption and copulation abound in Houellebecq's world, his characters show little enjoyment. If they do not get defeated in merciless competition, they are completely obsessed by their physical decay and their approaching deaths. Houellebecq shows the reader the dark side of the facade of the consumer society; he incessantly returns to themes of illness, ugliness, decay, death, envy, sex addiction, indifference, frustration and lovelessness. In *Whatever,* moreover, everyone over the age of forty is obsolete. Life may only begin at fifty, one of the characters cynically remarks, but the problem is that it ends at forty. Seniors are shamelessly left to fend for themselves, and euthanasia solves the rest. Just like the psychiatrist Dalrymple in his depressing book *Life at the Bottom: The Worldview That Makes the Underclass*,[15] Houellebecq aims his arrows at the leftist's ideals of the sixties, which, according to him, fit in seamlessly with the drive to enjoyment of the liberal market economy. But contrary to Dalrymple, Houellebecq's most important weapon is not the ironic argument but cynical provocation. With sardonic pleasure Houellebecq let his main characters, in their battle "against the dictatorship of youth," defend incest and pedophilia, the last taboos that have not been brought under the rule of the market.[16]

Behind Houellebecq's cynicism, however, hides a humanist compassion for the victims of this world of market and battle. Jan-Hendrik Bakker points out the inner contradiction that characterizes Houellebecq's work:

> It proclaims the total burn-out of humanism, though at the same time it is so strongly rooted in it. His authorship embodies the aporia of modernity: on the one hand we complain about the world because in the age of Enlightenment

> it became disenchanted, on the other hand we do this on behalf of the idea of humanity that is so closely connected with the Enlightenment. However much the author is inspired by reason and humanity, the utopian perspective is totally lacking. Houellebecq does not write on behalf of an ideal. His position is "in the center of the world," as expressed in the original French title of the book *Au milieu du monde: Platforme*.[17]

On the face of it, there appears to be very little reason for hope indeed. Following in Schopenhauer's footsteps, Houellebecq emphasizes that life is suffering. The first paragraph of his "manifesto" *To Stay Alive—Method* sets the tone:

> The world is suffering unfolded. At its origin it is a node of suffering. All existence is an expansion, and a crushing. All things suffer into existence. Nothingness vibrates with pain until it arrives at being, in an abject paroxysm … Don't be afraid of happiness. It doesn't exist.[18]

In "Close to desperation," which I mentioned above, Houellebecq summarizes the tragic character of everyday life as follows:

> The dissolution of being is a tragic dissolution; and driven by a grievous nostalgia every person keeps asking the other to be something he can no longer be, and to find the weight of being, like a blinded phantom, that he himself can no longer find. The resistance, the permanence; the depth. In the end, we all come away empty-handed, and the loneliness is terrible.[19]

Despite these ink-black, Schopenhauerian sounds, Bakker also hears some "echoes of a better world." First of all, in Houellebecq's work, "amidst all of the fucking, licking and sucking," we unexpectedly find a number of examples of "shocking faith and altruism."[20] He points toward the devotion that the two women in *The Elementary Particles,* Christiane and Annabelle, display toward the main characters in the novel: the brothers Bruno and Michel.[21] Bakker also discerns a "hidden inclination towards spiritual ascesis."[22] More particularly, Bakker finds traces of sympathy for Buddhism in *The Elementary Particles,* especially in the passage on Annabelle's death, in which Michel sees distancing himself from any passion as the only remedy against the hell of life. Much can be said in favor of this argument, and it is also entirely in line with Schopenhauer—who was also marked by Buddhism.

ELEMENTARY PARTICLES

If Houellebecq's oeuvre had been limited to the works discussed above, then it would have been a brilliant expression of the nihilism that holds European culture captive, but no more than that. However, in *The Elementary Particles* and *The Possibility of an Island,* something happens that spectacularly takes this

oeuvre beyond nihilism. At first, *The Elementary Particles* appears to offer more of the same. Like his previous work, this novel, too, displays the disintegration of Western society and the Grand Narratives that carried it. The title refers to a passage from his studies on Lovecraft, which I quoted above. Just like the cosmos, society is no more than "a furtive arrangement of elementary particles" that cannot connect to one another. The novel describes the lives of two half-brothers, Bruno and Michel, who grow up separately. Bruno, who suffers from his unhappy childhood, is a typical Houellebecq "hero," who has grown up to become a hedonist, addicted to sex. Michel, on the other hand (it is remarkable that many of Houellebecq's characters have his first name), is a brilliant molecular biologist.

However, at the end of the novel a sublime experience awaits the reader, when it turns out, in the brief Epilogue, that the whole previous novel about Bruno and Michel is a reconstruction written by a representative of "the second phase of mankind" in 2070. This clone reveals that an article by Michel called "*Toward Perfect Reproduction"* (which was published in *Nature* in 2009), has been used in 2011 by "the Movement for Human Potential" to create a new intelligent life-form. It turns out that man actually succeeds in 2029 in creating this new creature "in his own image"[23] The "new human being" also reveals that the "old human beings" have quickly become largely extinct:

> Contrary to the doomsayers, this extinction is taking place peaceably, despite occasional acts of violence, which also continue to decline. It has been surprising to note the meekness, resignation, perhaps even secret relief with which humans have consented to their own passing.[24]

The "new intelligent being" continues:

> Having broken the filial chain that linked us to humanity, we live on. Men consider us to be happy; it is certainly true that we have succeeded in overcoming the monstrous egotism, cruelty and anger which they could not; we live very different lives. Science and art are still part of our society; but without the stimulus of personal vanity, the pursuit of Truth and Beauty has taken a less urgent aspect. To humans of the old species, our world seems a paradise. We have been known to refer to ourselves—with a certain humor—by the name they so long dreamed of: gods.[25]

As it turns out the book was dedicated to the "unfortunate yet brave species" that has created the new mankind, because it always kept on believing in goodness and love, despite its unbounded egoism and enormous explosions of anger. And because it was able to turn the possibility of surpassing itself into a reality.

For the reader who is trained in Houellebecq's nihilism, this "salvation through science" is a true *deus ex machina.* It is difficult to uncover whether we are dealing with an unexpected "conversion" to a scientistic echo of "the dead

God" here, or with yet another cynical provocation instead.[26] However, in essays and interviews that were published around the time of the publication of *The Elementary Particles,* Houellebecq does appear to be a serious proponent of the technical elimination of those human characteristics that are responsible for the inherent suffering of this species. In his "Humanity, Phase Two," his introduction to the *Scum Manifesto* of militant feminist Valerie Solanas, who wanted to destroy male society, he praises her for the fact that she

> [has] had the courage to take a progressive, well-considered stance, in line with the most noble aspirations of the Western project: to ensure that mankind will get full technical control over nature, including its own biological nature and evolution.
>
> All of this to create a new nature built on foundations that align with moral law, in short, to establish the universal kingdom of love, full stop.[27]

Moreover, in a more recent interview he makes a case for cloning human beings. While he is aware of the risks—"The consequences ought to be calculated carefully, that is the most important thing"—to him there are no ethical objections. When asked whether cloning does not testify to *hubris,* he responds by referring to the chance processes that have played such a central role in natural evolution: "I don't see why allowing for chance would be of a higher moral order than control by human beings."[28]

In light of our (limited) ability to control technologies, Houellebecq's faith in "properly calculating" the consequences of cloning is rather naive. Moreover, it is clear that current cloning techniques are far removed from the image that Houellebecq describes in his novel. Right now, we simply do not know whether cloning of humans will ever become a reality. But it seems obvious to me that biotechnology and information technology will start challenging the human life-form in a variety of ways within the next decades. Also, it seems evident to me that we will need all of our imagination within our limited space for action. Seen from this perspective, *The Elementary Particles* is a sublime challenge to our imagination.

THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ISLAND

In Houellebecq's next novel, *The Possibility of an Island,* yet another, and no less considerable, surprise awaits the reader. In this book, the surprising narrative position that Houellebecq introduced in the Epilogue to *The Elementary Particles* is extended. The main character in *The Possibility of an Island* is called Daniel1, a comedian who has had tremendous success with his provocative and controversial shows, but who suffers from his tragic love life. The main character's narrative perspective is interwoven with that of Daniel24 and Daniel25, who comment on the "both funny and tragic biography" of their "primal model"

approximately 2,000 years later. Daniel1 tells the story of his life, which is as sad as those of all the other main characters in Houellebecq's novels. On the face of it, Daniel1 is nothing but a brutish, egotistic jerk, who has left his first wife when she became pregnant, who sexually entertains himself with young, female fans and who worries about his bodily decay. We are made witness to his sexual adventures and love affair with Isabelle, the main editor of *Lolita,* the "sex and fun" magazine for young people, whom he dumps as well after some time, only to start an affair with the young porn star Esther. This stormy sensual relationship gives Daniel1 a "peak experience," which is followed like a shadow by his realization that this will probably be the final peak experience in his life before the final decay will mercilessly set in. As he already suspected, it all turns into a deep disillusionment. The first signs of it arise in an exchange between Daniel1 and Esther, in which we also see Daniel1's other side for the first time. Daniel1 abhors the glorification of violence and the disrespect for older people that characterize Esther's generation; and also her reluctance to enter into a lasting engagement. In Daniel1 and Esther's relationship it appears as though the traditional roles have been reversed. Whereas Isabelle did not enjoy sex enough, Esther does not care enough for love. Daniel1 has to suffer in silence while she entertains a whole range of younger lovers. When she dumps him, he commits suicide. Before doing so, he sends her a last poem that deals with the possibility of an island.

The story of Daniel1's tragic love life is interwoven with another story: that of his membership in the Elohimites, a cloning sect that is based on the volcanic island of Lanzarote (the same island where Houellebecq also situated his earlier novella by the same title), a sect that believes in the arrival of extraterrestrial beings and promises eternal life to its followers through cloning. One of the members of the sect turns out to be a brilliant scientist who experiments with cloning, thanks to the generous donations of the members of the sect, and is about to have a big scientific breakthrough. The highest leader—"the Prophet"—preaches a non-possessive love, yet insists on having exclusive access to the curvy bodies of his twelve fiancées (with this blasphemous referral to Jesus and his twelve disciples, Houellebecq successfully targeted yet another offended audience).

> More and more, Daniel1 thinks, men were going to want to live freely, irresponsibly, on a wild quest for pleasure; they were going to want to live like those who were already living amongst them, the *kids,* and when old age would make its weight felt, when it would become impossible for them to continue to struggle, they would put an end to it all; but in the meantime they would have joined the Elohimite Church, their genetic code would have been safeguarded, and they would die in the hope of an indefinite continuation of that same existence that was devoted to pleasure. Such was the direction of the movement of history, which would not only be limited to the West, the West was just happy to take

> the lead and scout out the road ahead, as it had been doing since the end of the Middle Ages. After that the species, in its current form, would disappear; after that, something different would emerge, whose name could not yet be spoken, and which would perhaps be worse, perhaps better, but certainly more limited in its ambitions, and in any case more calm, the importance of impatience and frenzy should not be underestimated in human history. Perhaps that crude imbecile Hegel had, at the end of the day, seen things correctly, perhaps I was a servant of the *cunning of reason.* It was scarcely plausible that the species destined to succeed us would be, to the same degree, a social specifies. Essentially, you're borne alone, you live alone and you die alone.[29]

Reading these lines we are inclined to think that Nietzsche was right. What the Elohimites movement strives for is "lust without fragility," an eternal sense of happiness—and in this sense it resembled the transhumanist movement.[30] This is precisely what Nietzsche's "last men" are after: an untroubled existence, without risks or suffering. In a way, the cloned "new human being," genetically modified according to a "hedonistic imperative,"[31] is the perfected version of Nietzsche's last man. Nietzsche's remark that "the last human being lives longest"[32] appears to be realized in the most radical way in this case. An eternity of pleasure. A life like that of the Olympian gods! And these clones are only the intermittent phase toward a life-form that will surpass embodiment entirely. In the Prologue to this book, Daniel24 turns to the reader in the resounding voice of Nietzsche's Zarathustra: "No one will be present at the birth of the Spirit, except for the Future Ones; but the Future Ones are not beings, in our sense of the word. Fear what I say."[33]

The Prologue and Daniel24's and Daniel25's commentaries, which are interspersed between the chapters in which Daniel1's life story is told, show that the Elohimite movement has actually succeeded in its attempts at cloning humans in Houellebecq's novel. Since it is our life narrative that makes up our human identities, clones have to delve into the experiences of their primal model after "birth" (they are born in the bodies of eighteen year olds). Since it was impossible to create the gene for altruism, they live solitary lives in closed electronic cells. They do communicate with one another, but no longer have the urges, emotions and tragic streak that are intrinsic to human life. This is also apparent in the commentaries written by Daniel24 and Daniel25. These are exceptionally boring, emotionally flat and predictable, a perfect mirror of their tranquil existence. They try to understand Daniel1's life, but can only touch upon the outside of it. Just as man is separated from animals by a deep abyss, so the transhuman "new human being" appears to be separated from the "old human being" by a deep abyss. Not only do they lack the joys and pains that characterize the life of the "old human being," but their immortality also makes it impossible for them to understand the fundamental finitude of the human life-form. But they are also separated by a deep abyss from the superhuman "Future Ones," "beings

made of silicon. Whose civilization would be built through the progressive interconnection of cognitive and memory processors."[34] Daniel25 says: "The Future Ones, unlike us, will not be machines, nor truly separated beings. They will be one, whilst also being many. Nothing can give us an exact image of the Future Ones."[35]

Just like *The Elementary Particles,* this book, *The Possibility of an Island,* ends unexpectedly. In the Epilogue, it becomes clear that the tranquility of their existence has raised an irresistible desire in the new human beings, the desire to understand what drove their restless predecessors. They become fascinated by the urge of the "old ones" to keep on striving for happiness, although it continually escapes them. Tired of her untroubled existence, Daniel25's pen pal Marie23 abandons her electronic cocoon to search for "a hypothetical neohuman community."[36]

Marie23 has been compelled to do so by the last poem that Daniel1 had sent Esther. Daniel25 decides to follow her, because he wants to experience, at least, the *memory* of the pain and happiness of the original Daniel. In almost lyrical tones, the Epilogue describes the long travels that Daniel25 undertakes to find Marie23 and her community of new human beings. His journey takes him through the post-apocalyptic landscape of Spain; during the last phases of interhuman conflicts, Madrid was destroyed by a series of nuclear explosions. In the First Reduction the world population was reduced from 14 billion to 700 million, and after the Second Reduction, which was accompanied by the Great Dryness, the earth was populated by groups of wild humans—besides small enclaves of new human beings. Daniel25 travels west-southwest, in the direction of the island "Lanzarote, or in a nearby area,"[37] where he hopes to find Marie23. He has to undergo severe hardships and torments; the old industrial complexes in Europe are covered with thick forests by now, full of wolves and bears; the heat is exhausting, and he also has to keep the dangerous and unbearably smelly wild humans at bay. How dangerous these wild humans are becomes apparent when he witnesses a "binding ritual" in which they devour one of their own in a Dionysian ritual and eat him raw. Daniel25 continues, because he has a goal now. He wants to suffer:

> Planning the extinction of desire in Buddhist-like terms, the Supreme Sister had banked on the maintenance of a weakened, non-tragic, energy, purely conservative in nature, which would have continued to enable the functioning of thought—a thought less quick but more exact because more lucid, a thought that knew *deliverance.* This phenomenon 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. The most patent indicator of failure was that I had ended up envying the destiny of Daniel1, his violent and contradictory journey, the amorous passions that had shaken him—whatever his suffering and tragic end.[38]

Schopenhauer and Freud have taught us how cruel nature is. Daniel25 also realizes that the lust principle is usually commanded by the death instinct:

> Entirely placed beneath the power of nature, the life of wild animals consisted only of pain, with a few moments of brief relaxation, of happy mindlessness linked to the satisfaction of instincts—for food and sex. The life of man had been, in gross terms, similar, dominated by suffering, with brief moments of pleasure, linked to the conscientisation of instinct, which manifested itself as desire in the human species. The life of the neohumans was intended to be peaceful, rational, remote from pleasure as well as suffering, and my departure would bear witness to its failure.[39]

After many adventures, Daniel25 finds a tubular case with a message from Marie23, "a further display of this absurd or sublime determination, present in humans and remaining identical in their successors, to bear witness, to leave a trace."[40] Daniel25 knows that he will have to die because he has left his cocoon: "Departing from, at my own free will, the cycle of rebirths and deaths, I was making my way towards a simple nothingness, a pure absence of content. Only the Future Ones would perhaps succeed in joining the realm of countless possibilities."[41] Nevertheless, it takes a while before he comes to realize fully what mortality means. Just as the "old human being" kept behaving with the folly of the mortal, long after he had technically become immortal, so, too, Daniel25 could never fully grasp what death meant: "I knew that I would never manage to become completely conscious of death; I would never know boredom, desire or fear to the same extent as a human being."[42]

Marie23's tubular case also contains something else, by the way: a page torn from a pocket copy of Plato's *Symposium.* It contains the famous fragment in which Aristophanes explains what Eros is. He says that lovers desire one another when they are separate, because in the past they were a complete, single being. Because these powerful beings with four arms and four legs "tried to make an ascent to heaven so as to attack the gods" (Plato 1997, *Symposium,* 190b), they had to be punished. However, Zeus did not want to strike them with a lightning bolt, because then the gods would lose the honors and offerings that were given to them by human beings. He decided to cut them in half (and if that proved insufficient, to repeat it once more). Since then, human beings have been restlessly searching for their other half. Eros rests on a fundamental lack. Daniel25 has learned from the Supreme Sister that these are exceptionally dangerous writings:

> It was this book that intoxicated Western mankind, mankind as a whole, which has inspired in it disgust at its condition of a rational animal, which had engendered in it a dream that it had taken two millennia to try and rid itself of, without completely succeeding.[43]

When Daniel25 starts to realize that it is likely he will never find Marie23 because of his limited life span and the size of the earth, he suddenly understands

"how a first theory of love had been able to form in the brain of Plato."[44] And he also understands why the Supreme Sister let them read the depressing life stories of their human predecessors: "I understood the goal she was trying to reach: I understood also, why this goal would never be reached. I had not found deliverance … I was, I was no longer. Life was real."[45]

TRAGIC HUMANISM

The Possibility of an Island unexpectedly ends as an ode to the life-form and the attitude to life that could be labeled as a *tragic humanism.* The novel shows us why our finite life full of suffering is worth "drinking till the last drop." And why the immortal life of our transhuman clones might very well be less pleasant than transhumanists think. The "unredeemed" Daniel25 reminds us of "undead" comatose patients like Terri Schiavo. Both are in-between beings, the latter floating between the human and the subhuman, the former between the human and the superhuman, the *Übermensch.* Because he is immortal, the "new human being" relates to mortals as the Greek gods did to human beings. The new human being is immortal just like the Olympian gods, and just like them he is jealous of mortal man. While both the gods and the new human beings have eternal life, they are jealous of man nevertheless. They are jealous not despite, but because of man's suffering. Man is *aporos,* without a way out in life; to him, death is inevitable. But precisely because of that he *is pantaporos,* many bridges.[46] Man *is* sorrow; fate will strike him time and again. Not despite this fact but because of it, man knows happiness. And it is intense happiness, not despite the fact that it is fragile, but precisely because of the fragility of that which is dear to us. This is the fundamental ground of tragic humanism.

Our reason tells us that we live on an island, "enclosed by nature itself within unchangeable bounds."[47] But our imagination will never give up on building bridges to the other side, bridges to islands of individual happiness. But also bridges to utopias such as New Atlantis, Lanzarote, a United Europe. Because this, too, should be clear by now: Europe is not a continent, but an island. The "idea of Europe" is inexorably related to the tragic, to a tragic awareness and to Greek tragedy. Europe is the birthplace and the guardian of tragic humanism.[48] Even though fate comes knocking at everyone's door sooner or later, we cannot but continue, guided by blind hope:

My life, my life, my very old one
My first badly healed desire,
My first crippled love,
You had to return.

It was necessary to know
What is best in our lives,

When two bodies play at happiness,
Unite, reborn without end.

Entered into complete dependency,
I know the trembling of being,
The hesitation to disappear,
Sunlight upon the forest's edge

And love, where all is easy,
Where all is given in the instant;
There exists in the midst of time
The possibility of an island.

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Notes

1. This article will also appear in a somewhat adapted form as a section in the final chapter of: Jos de Mul, *Destiny Domesticated: The Rebirth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Technology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014). ISBN13: 978-1-4384-4971-5 (hardcover)/ISBN13: 978-1-4384-4973-9 (electronic). I would like to thank Bibi van den Berg for assisting me with the translation of the text.
2. F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. Trans. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 68.
3. G. Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), p. 353.
4. Th.C.W. Oudemans and A.P.M.H. Lardinois, *Tragic Ambiguity: Anthropology, Philosophy and Sophocles' Antigone* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1987), p. 353.
5. "I promise a tragic age: tragedy, the highest art of saying yes to life, will be reborn when humanity has moved beyond consciousness of the harshest though most necessary wars without suffering from it." Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*. Trans. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 110.
6. In Nietzsche's philosophy, technology is remarkably absent. If it is mentioned at all, and this is the case primarily in his "positivistic" phase, then his remarks are without exception extremely critical. Cf. R.E. McGinn, 1980, "Nietzsche on Technology," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 41: 679–9. From the aphorism "Response to machine culture," in *Human, All Too Human* it becomes evident that it is unthinkable

for Nietzsche that technology could do what art might do: "The machine, itself a product of the highest intellectual energies, sets in motion in those who serve it almost nothing but the lower, non-intellectual energies. It thereby releases a vast quantity of energy in general that would otherwise lie dormant, it is true; but it provides no instigation to enhancement, to improvement, to becoming an artist." F. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 366–7.

7. See for a more comprehensive elaboration of this claim: J. de Mul, *Destiny Domesticated: The Rebirth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Technology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014).
8. In Houellebecq's work, much might be a pose, but at least his pessimism appears to be existentially embodied. In the eighties, he was treated at psychiatric hospitals several times after a divorce and the loss of his job.
9. M. Houellebecq, *Rester vivant et autres textes* (Paris: Librio, 1999), p. 52.
10. Ibid., p. 50.
11. B. van der Straeten, 2006, "La Possibilité d'une île en de politiek van het posthumanisme," *De Gids*, 2006: 22–29, p. 22.
12. Ibid., p. 23.
13. M. Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* (London: Gollancz, 2008), p. 32.
14. We also encounter the theme of this novel explicitly in the programmatic study on Lovecraft: "The reach of liberal capitalism has extended over minds; in step and in hand with it are mercantilism, publicity, the absurd and sneering cult of economic efficiency, the exclusive and immoderate appetite for material riches. Worse still, liberalism has spread from the domain of economics to the domain of sexuality. Every sentimental fiction has been eradicated. Purity, chastity, fidelity, and decency are ridiculous stigmas." Ibid., pp.115–16.
15. T. Dalrymple, *Life at the Bottom: The Worldview That Makes the Underclass* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2001).
16. As Daniel1, the protagonist of *The Possibility of an Island*, expresses it*:* "Why for example should male and male adolescents, voracious and sheep-like consumers, always greedy for pocket money, not be *forced into* prostitution, the only means by which they could modestly reimburse the immense efforts and struggles that were made for their well-being? And why, at a time when contraconception had been perfected, and the risk of genetic degeneration perfectly localized, should we maintain the absurd and humiliating taboo on incest? Those are the real questions, the authentic moral issues!" M. Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*. Trans. Gavin Bowd (London: Phoenix, 2006), p. 185.
17. J.H. Bakker, 2004, "Alleen de literatuur kan ons nog redden: Over het menselijke bij Michel Houellebecq," *Tirade*, 402: p. 91. Houellebecq himself is aware of this tension in his work. In an interview with the communist newspaper *L'Humanité* in 1996, he states: "Personally, I can only see one way: to keep on murdering the contradictions that tear me apart without compromise." Quoted in: M. De Haan, "De romanpoëzie van Michel Houellebecq." In Michel Houellebecq, *De wereld als markt en strijd* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2000), p. 173.

18. Houellebecq, *Rester vivant et autres textes*, pp. 9, 21. In *The Possibility of an Island*, the main character, Daniel, summarizes the impossibility of happiness in a poignant fashion: "During the first part of your life, you only become aware of happiness once you have lost it. Then an age comes, a second one, in which you already know, at the moment when you begin to experience true happiness, that you are, at the end of the day, going to lose it." Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, p. 145.
19. Houellebecq, *Rester vivant et autres textes*, p. 51.
20. Bakker, "Alleen de literatuur kan ons nog redden," p. 92.
21. In an interview in 1995, when asked for "a few reasons to delay committing suicide for now," Houellebecq refers to the case that Kant makes against suicide in *Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals*. The destruction of the subject of morality, Houellebecq argues following Kant, would result in the annihilation of morality as such. Houellebecq continues: "The argument appears to be naive and almost touching in its innocence, as is often the case with Kant; yet I think there is no other argument. Only duty can really sustain us. To be concrete, when one aims to undertake a practical duty, one must act in such a way, as to make the other being's happiness dependent on one's own existence; one could, for instance, attempt to raise a young child, or else buy a poodle." M. Houellebecq, *Interventions 2: Traces* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009), p. 54. In his studies on Lovecraft, he raises another argument against suicide: "Of course life has no meaning. But neither does death." Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft*, p. 32.
22. Bakker, ibid.
23. M. Houellebecq, *The Elementary Particles*. Trans. Frank Wynne (New York: Knopf, 2000), p. 262.
24. Ibid. p. 363.
25. Ibid.
26. As it turns out, Houellebecq also did not know. In an interview in a Dutch monthly, he remarks: "If you were to ask me whether the construction of a utopia at the end of my book was intended ironically or seriously, then I have to admit that I do not know. That is for the reader to decide. But I did consider it to be an interesting track to think along." S. Messeman and de P. Moor 1999, "De Nieuwe Mens: Interview with Michel Houellebecq," *De Groene Amsterdammer*, August 25.
27. M. Houellebecq, "Préface: L'humanité, second stade." In V. Solanas (ed.) *Scum Manifesto*, pp. 63–9 (Paris: Éditions Mille et une nuit, 1998).
28. R. Moerland, 2005, "'Ik ben een Romanticus'. Interview met Michel Houellebecq," *NRC Handelsblad*, September 23, 2005, p. 27.
29. Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, pp. 365–6.
30. For a more extensive discussion of the ambitions and illusions of the transhumanist movement, see J. de Mul, "Transhumanism: The Convergence of Evolution, Humanism, and Information Technology," in *Cyberspace Odyssey. Towards a Virtual Ontology and Anthropology* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), pp. 243–62.
31. See "*The Hedonistic Imperative*," www.hedweb.com.

32. F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. Trans. Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 10.
33. Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, p. 7.
34. Ibid., p. 420.
35. Ibid., p. 412.
36. Ibid., p. 377.
37. Ibid., p. 381.
38. Ibid., pp. 383–4.
39. Ibid., pp. 413–14.
40. Ibid., p. 414.
41. Ibid., pp. 419–20.
42. Ibid., p. 416.
43. Ibid., p. 417.
44. Ibid., p. 421.
45. Ibid., pp. 421–2, 423.
46. The words *aporos* and *pantaporos* refer to Sophocles' famous first *stasimon* of the Antigone. See for an interpretation of this ambiguous and ironic word: de Mul, "Ode of Man," *Destiny Domesticated*, pp. 121–37.
47. I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998[1790]), pp. A235–6.
48. Not humanism, but the tragic interpretation of humanism, distinguishes Europe from other continents. What sets apart Europe's "tragic humanism" from the United States' "happy humanism," for instance, becomes apparent when we compare Houellebecq's last novel with the science fiction movie *The Island*, by director Michael Bay, which also came out in 2005 and has a similar theme to *The Possibility of an Island*. (I thank Menno van Schaijk, who pointed out this similarity.) The movie *The Island* revolves around a colony (a big building), in which the survivors of earth's destruction, caused by pollution and warfare, live. At least, that is what the survivors think: in reality, they are clones of earth's inhabitants and they are bred as organ donors. Those who have let themselves be cloned also do not know the real story: they were told that their clones are permanently in a vegetative state, just like comatose patients. In the subterranean colony, they are kept in excellent condition (healthy food and lots of sports), but love and sex are taboo; *proximity violations* are severely punished. Every week, there is a lottery in the colony, and the winners are told that they can emigrate to the only place on earth that has been spared: "the Island." In reality, they are deported to a clinic, where their organs are harvested and they themselves are killed. Lincoln Six Echo and Jordan Two Delta, the two main characters of the movie, suspect that they are being lied to and decide that, when the latter wins the lottery, they will escape the colony. They find out that their fellow sufferers served as "building materials" for the medical industry and that the promise of "the Island" is a lie. Chased by mercenaries out to kill them, Lincoln and Jordan gradually come to like one another more and more. When they end up

falling in love with one another, Jordan whispers in Lincoln's ear: "The Island *does* exist." After many adventures, they manage to expose the fraud. In the final frame of the movie, we see Jordan and Lincoln in a sailing boat by the coast of a beautiful tropical island. *The Possibility of an Island* and *The Island* can be seen as parallel opposites. In Houellebecq's novel, at first the utopian island (Lanzarote) really exists, but throughout the story it turns out that it has (probably) been destroyed in a nuclear war. It only lives on as an "appealing ideal," or a "contrafactual anticipation." *The Island*, by contrast, starts with the realization that the utopian island does *not* exist. In the end, however, it turns out that the island is not just a possibility, but even a reality. With this kind of optimistic belief in a happy ending (which characterizes comedy), Hollywood—the empty dream of the United States—is diametrically opposed to Europe's blind hope (the defining characteristic of tragedy).

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