

Mapping Happiness in *Serotonin* by Michel Houellebecq

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Introduction

Happiness is presumably not the first concept someone would think of after reading a novel by Michel Houellebecq; the impossibility of happiness seems to be more appropriate. Yet, at brief periods in Houellebecq works, characters do experience something which can be named a sense of happiness. In the academic work named *The Eudaimonic Turn: Well-Being in Literary Studies* (2012), the authors advocated the importance of more attention towards those aspects of life causing a sense of well-being. 'We mean by the eudaimonic turn an emphasis on that which is directly constitutive of well-being [...] the study of human flourishing in all its forms.'¹ According to them, literary studies is too much focused on dark narratives. Those narratives that provide a form of positivity are not regarded as sophisticated. The consequence of a focus on dark narratives lies in the misinterpretation of human emotions: 'the human experience is also characterized by love, friendship, happiness, fulfilment, healing, growth, beneficial transformation through hardship and suffering and a host of other eudaimonic experiences.'² Houellebecq's latest novel *Serotonin* (2019), could be regarded as a dark narrative since the novel touches upon subjects like loneliness, suicide and the use of anti-depressants. Still, even though the novel is characterized by these darker aspects of life; ideas that might lead to human flourishing are present as well, ideas about happiness.

The protagonist Labrouste finds himself unhappy in his relationship with Yuzu. He plans to leave her, but soon after, he gets confronted with his own loneliness. In a response to this mental setback, he starts to think about those people from the past he loved, either through friendship or in a romantic way. He feels the urge to visit these people, as a reader we are informed why the romantic relationships failed: Labrouste could not withstand the temptations of other women. The temptations provided by contemporary culture, which prevent the existence of enduring love and therefore happiness, are important aspects of the novel. Another important aspect reveals itself through the following question: what is a healthy state of mind? Is a person who does not desire anything sick or is this person simply experiencing an ascetic form of happiness? *Serotonin* explores aspects which have been

¹ James Pawelski, D.J. Moores, *The Eudaimonic Turn: Well-Being in Literary Studies* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012) 15.

² *Ibidem*, 22.

investigated by nineteenth century philosophers: Auguste Comte and Arthur Schopenhauer. Houellebecq has used his knowledge about these men, and projected a vision on society based on their philosophy

The contemporary French population uses the highest amount of anti-depressants and bears the highest number of suicides in Europe. *Serotonin* also depicts the use of anti-depressants and touches upon the topic of suicide. This thesis will argue that *Serotonin* criticizes an existing mentality towards anti-depressants; by prescribing this medicine to a protagonist who might not actually need it in the first place. Moreover, his life only becomes worse after using it. Thus, the novel contains elements that relate to the psychic problems of the French society. Ideas are present in *Serotonin* that question several cultural aspects in French society in relation to human flourishing. This thesis strives to reveal these ideas on happiness, which are present below the surface. The main research question is the following: in what ways do ideas on happiness manifest themselves in Michel Houellebecq's novel *Serotonin*? It should be noted that this thesis will not provide a clear definition of the broad term happiness. It is merely an exploration of Houellebecqian ideas on suffering and therefore also happiness. In the chapters, multiple ideas on reaching a state of human flourishing will pass by, but not an exact definition of happiness.

The first chapter will focus on traces of Schopenhauerian thinking in *Serotonin*. The previously mentioned question is central to understand the essence of this chapter: what is a healthy state of mind? Is a person who does not desire anything sick or is this person simply experiencing an ascetic form of happiness? In order to answer this question a understanding of the Schopenhauerian line of thinking with regards to the will to live is necessary. The will to live shall be explored in the first part of this chapter, by using an autobiographic essay of Houellebecq: *En présence de Schopenhauer* (2017). Through discussing this essay we will get acquainted with the Schopenhauerian will and the measures deemed necessary to end suffering, that is caused by desire. Other subjects like selfless observation and the difference between sensual and mental pleasure shall be treated extensively. Next, we will discuss the influence of Schopenhauer on Houellebecq. According to Houellebecq, experiencing sensual pleasure in contemporary society has become more difficult, although these sensual pleasures do provide happiness to the majority of people. The higher form of mental pleasure is only reserved for a selected few: often artistic people. A change in culture since May 1968 has altered the possibilities of experiencing both sensual

and mental pleasure. Happiness in French society has decreased after May 1968 through the instalment of a material culture which is highly competitive and lacks metaphysical meaning.

The second part of this chapter will compare *Serotonin* with statements from one of Schopenhauer's major texts: *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1819). Ideas from *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* on: the will, the state of non-desire, the body, refusing to accept the process of suffering, and suicide may be recognized in *Serotonin*. Strong influences of Schopenhauer on the novel will be demonstrated by quoting multiple passages from *Serotonin* and explaining the Schopenhauerian interpretation. Moreover, the will to live of the characters Aymeric and Labrouste shall be investigated. It will be argued that both characters have a lot in common, the misfortunes of both men are caused by the same reasons. The characters suffer from the will to live and cultural circumstances. We will show that *Serotonin* can be read as an 21th century exploration of Schopenhauerian ideas, ideas that touch upon human flourishing and therefore happiness.

So, the first chapter dealt with the burdens of desire. These desires are often aimed at maintaining a loving relationship, something which seems impossible to achieve. The impossibility of love is depicted in a symbolic manner in the novel. Namely, by using the oral phase of Sigmund Freud to symbolize a return the infantile stage, this stage is characterized by a lack of love. The second chapter will treat traces of Sigmund Freud in *Serotonin*. French society has returned at the oral phase, by using the literal words of protagonist Labrouste, what does this actually mean? By using Freud's text from 1905, *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie*, we are introduced to his ideas about infantile sexuality and the oral phase. The lips can function as an erogenous zone according to Freud, repression of the erogenous function of the lips, will cause behaviour of excessive eating. Excessive eating is predominantly present in *Serotonin* through the description of extensive meals. Besides food, the second chapter will explore other examples with reference to the oral phase in the novel. The outcome of the oral phase is a sexuality which is auto-erotic, a sexuality that is not focused on another person. The oral phase is a symptom of a society that lacks love between persons, a situation that predominates in the novel.

Houellebecq also explores solutions to overcome the lack of love in society. He uses the philosophy of Auguste Comte and his Religion of Humanity, which is aimed at spreading kindness. So, the third chapter focuses on manifestations of Comte in *Serotonin*.

Houellebecq has written in his earlier novels: *The Elementary Particles* and *The Possibility of*

an Island, about Comtean solutions to the shortcomings of society. By creating a new ontology the shortcomings of society are possibly solved. This new ontology comprehends the following: a society that subordinates itself to science, by the means of cloning, which might end the amount of suffering under the will to live. These clones are no longer troubled by their desires. However, cloning is absent in Houellebecq's more recent work and in *Serotonin*. Still, some Comtean elements can be recognized through the Religion of Humanity. Comte presented ideas about the role of women that seem traditional from today's perspective. Yet, these ideas are present in *Serotonin*. Therefore, the novel can be read as an exploration of the Comtean vision about womanhood; women are meant to alleviate men in the Religion of Humanity. The bond between man and women is a safe haven of kindness in a society dominated by egoistic impulses. Furthermore, *Serotonin* can be read as both an exploration of Schopenhauerian and Comtean ideas in the 21st century, ideas which do not align perfectly with each other. How can human flourishing and happiness be maximized, by following Comte or Schopenhauer?

The final chapter will investigate the effects of the narrative genre, trial or tragedy, on the perceived outcome of happiness. The distinction between trial or tragedy is based on an article from 2017 by Vivasvan Soni: "Trials and Tragedies: The Literature of Unhappiness". First of all, a tragic structured narrative places the judgement of happiness at the end of the novel, while a trial structured narrative situates happiness at the end of the trial or test. Secondly, the moral dilemma underlining the choices of action of the protagonist, also place the narrative in a certain genre. Third, the response on part of the reader, sympathy or identification, is of importance. What kind of narrative genre does *Serotonin* have, and what are the implications on the possibility of happiness? Furthermore, the novel does not portray happy lives, how can a novel that touches upon very dark subjects still portray anything about happiness?

In the past, there have been a only few publications on happiness in Houellebecq. Insights that scholars have presented on happiness will be used in this thesis. The first scholar who wrote on happiness in the works of Houellebecq is Dr. Gavin Bowd. He wrote an article in 2002 named: "Michel Houellebecq and the Pursuit of Happiness". In this article Bowd investigates happiness in *Whatever* and *The Elementary Particles*. He emphasises Houellebecq's aversion towards liberalism and describes the solutions offered by Houellebecq. The alternative for liberal society can be found in Houellebecq's revolutionary

solution: 'a new ontology, compatible with the current state of scientific knowledge'³. This subjugation to science has the effect that a tentative connection is made between Auguste Comte and *The Elementary Particles*. Bowd however believes that this solution of a 'new ontology' is an actually a Communist project, Comte is only briefly named. We do not agree with Bowd on this point: Comte played a pivotal role in Houellebecq's vision of utopia, as we shall see in chapter three. Still, Bowd has been important for this thesis because he recognized strong affinities with the thought of Arthur Schopenhauer in *The Elementary Particles*, which led us to investigate Schopenhauerian elements in *Serotonin*.

Dr. Louis Betty is specialized in the works of Houellebecq. His dissertation approached Houellebecq from a philosophical perspective. In chapter three, this thesis will use two articles published by Betty : "Michel Houellebecq and the Promise of Utopia A Tale of Progressive Disenchantment" from 2015, and " 'F&#% autonomy': Houellebecq, Submission, and Enlightenment's 'last dismaying dregs' " from 2019. These articles investigate Houellebecq's vision on an ideal society. According to Betty, Houellebecq's conception of 'utopia' changed throughout his work. In his earlier work, he advocated and reproduced the viewpoints of 19th century philosophers, while in later works he seems to praise more traditional values. According to Betty, Houellebecq left the ideals of the enlightenment behind in his most recent work, and describes economic and social traditionalism (including social constraints) as the ultimate ways towards human flourishing. This thesis agrees with Betty on the presence of Comtean thought in Houellebecq's earlier work, but recognizes a deviation from Betty's thought in Houellebecq's latest novel *Serotonin*. Enlightenment ideals (Comte) are still present in *Serotonin*, although in combination with social traditionalism. The enlightenment ideals manifest themselves through Comte's Religion of Humanity, and the strong influence of Schopenhauer's will to live on the characters of Aymeric and Labrouste. Thus, the influence of 19th century philosophers still dominate the work of Houellebecq. Moreover, if Houellebecq depicts a form of utopia or ideal social state in the novel, then this ideal is inseparable from the thought of the 19th century philosophers. It could be argued that *Serotonin* is even an interplay between Comtean and Schopenhauerian ideas about human flourishing. Still, the

³ Gavin Bowd, "Michel Houellebecq and the Pursuit of Happiness," *Nottingham French Studies* 41, no. 1 (2002), 32.

articles of Betty are very useful in order to recognize Comtean elements in Houellebecq's earlier work, and therefore a source of inspiration.

An article from 2018 by Amar Ruth named: "Michel Houellebecq : la possibilité du bonheur dans l'ère du vide", was the direct motivation to investigate happiness in *Serotonin* in relation to Comte and Schopenhauer. Ruth recognizes three themes that define a question of happiness in the works of Houellebecq: namely, a sense of duty (opposed to passions), knowing yourself, and love (related to kindness and pity). Houellebecquian characters often neglect these three attitudes, which leads to their downfall. Ruth's inquiry will be used in the first chapter.

Unlike the previous three scholars, Dr. Benjamin Boysen did not write directly on happiness in Houellebecq, instead focusing on sexuality. His 2016 article is named: "Houellebecq's Priapism: The Failure of Sexual Liberation in Michel Houellebecq's Novels and Essays". Boysen states in this article that: 'characters in Houellebecq find themselves compelled to desire against their will'.⁴ The writer connects this notion with the medical condition named 'priapism'.⁵ Priapism causes chronic erection, which is not induced by erotic stimuli but through disease and ultimately leads to impotence. The patient suffers emotionally by feeling pain, humiliation and despair. Boysen explains that Houellebecq criticizes the sexual revolution which devastated western society. Social structures are causing an unbearable amount of desire while at the same time limiting the possibilities of satisfaction, causing people to suffer. This idea will be applied in the first chapter. Furthermore, Boysen's article investigates Houellebecquian ideas on: the failure of the sexual revolution, 'neoliberal freedom', the glorification of youth and sexual alienation.

⁴ Benjamin Boysen, "Houellebecq's Priapism: The Failure of Sexual Liberation in Michel Houellebecq's Novels and Essays," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 43, no. 3 (2016), 477.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 477.

Chapter 1

Traces of Schopenhauer in Houellebecq: recognizing the will to live in *Serotonin*

Houellebecq was inspired by the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. In the course of the years he wrote several texts about Schopenhauer. In 2017 he presented a autobiographic essay about the philosopher: *En présence de Schopenhauer*. This essay contains comments of Houellebecq on the thought of Schopenhauer. *En présence de Schopenhauer* does not portray any characters. He addresses the influence of Schopenhauer on his own line of thinking and gives comments on several issues based on extensive quotes; these quotes are mainly taken from Schopenhauer's works: *Aphorismen zu Lebensweisheit* and *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. The issues which are addressed in *En présence de Schopenhauer*, are the following: the loss of individuality through selfless observation, the passive nature of the artist, the will to live, the influence of Schopenhauerian thought on Houellebecq's own writing and the relation between individuality and happiness. The first issue, the loss of individuality, means a deep insight in other humans and organisms by transcending one's own ego. Houellebecq argues that the artist is able to transcend above his individuality more easily than others, since the artist possesses a very passive character or nature. The capabilities of transcending your individuality can be a source of happiness. A distinction is made between happiness of the mind and happiness reached through the senses. The majority of people suffer under their desires and the will to live, they are not able to experience a happiness of the mind; these people merely strive to satisfy their senses.

The first part of this chapter will elaborate on Houellebecq's interpretations of Schopenhauerian reasoning. This will be done by using Houellebecq's own essay about the German philosopher. The previously mentioned issues which are treated in *En présence de Schopenhauer* will be explained more extensively. The second part of the chapter will focus on *Serotonin*. The will to live of the characters Labrouste and Aymeric will be investigated. The focus will mainly lie on the subjects of suicide and the use of anti-depressants. Schopenhauer advocated acceptance of suffering, caused by the will to live; suicide and anti-depressants achieve the exact opposite. Anti-depressants numb the pain and suicide is

caused by desiring too much. This second part of the chapter will compare *Serotonin* with passages from Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*.

En présence de Schopenhauer

Chapter two in *En présence de Schopenhauer* is dedicated to the concept of art. According to Houellebecq, the artist possesses certain characteristics which are in line with the Schopenhauerian idea of selfless observation. What is the idea of selfless observation? In order to understand selfless observation, we have to understand the 'will to live'. The will manifests itself in every living thing according to Schopenhauer. Organisms strive on a permanent basis towards their ideal living conditions, they desire something. Since these ideal living conditions have not been reached yet, the organism is lacking something. This sense of shortcoming causes a sense of suffering. Organisms are driven to overcome this suffering by fulfilling their desires. The incentive behind the desire is called the will to live. However, if the organism or individual is able to satisfy their desires, a new sense of suffering soon emerges: boredom. The individual will seek new desires in order to overcome their sense of boredom. The cycle of the will then starts all over again.⁶

If we would like to end the cycle that causes our suffering, we should end the will to live. Ending the will is possible in three ways: organisms could stop reproducing, which abruptly ends the cycle; persons should make an effort to recognise the will to live in the incentives of every living creature, by which the illusion of individuality is identified (which stands at the origin of our desires and suffering); and finally transcending our individuality through selfless observation of other organisms. In other words, by recognizing the will to live in other living creatures, we can transcend our own individuality or sense of uniqueness. Apparently every living organism is permanently striving to reach their ideal living conditions, which also means that every organism is suffering. By deeply focusing on another organism, we are able to transcend our own individuality; we recognize the incentives or the will to live, we recognize the eternal and become one with the other organism. The following words of Schopenhauer are quoted in Houellebecq's essay to describe selfless observation and the transcendence of individuality: 'Onze wil vergeten en alleen nog bestaan als zuiver subject, als heldere spiegel van het object [...] het hele bewustzijn is door één enkel

⁶ Michel Houellebecq, *In aanwezigheid van Schopenhauer* (De Arbeiderspers 2018), introduction, p.23, e-book.

aanschouwelijk beeld volledig gevuld [...] daardoor is de in die aanschouwing betrokkene ook geen individu meer, want het individu heeft zich juist in de aanschouwing verloren: hij is nu een zuiver, willoos, pijnloos, tijdloos subject van het kennen.⁷

Houellebecq makes a connection between the Schopenhauerian notion of selfless observation and the creation of art, by addressing the importance of passiveness.

Houellebecq states the following about passiveness: 'Het aanvangspunt, het punt waaraan elke vorm van schepping ontspringt, is eigenlijk van heel andere aard; het schuilt in een aangeboren – en om diezelfde reden niet aan te leren – neiging tot passieve, je zou haast zeggen afgestompte aanschouwing van de wereld.'⁸ A person with passive characteristics is able to experience selfless observation more easily. Selfless observation allows someone to observe the world in detail: 'Het wezenlijke is dat hij als enige onder de volwassenen nog de onbedorven opmerkingsgave bezit die je doorgaans alleen bij kinderen, bij waanzinnigen of in dromen aantreft.'⁹ Why is the passive nature of the artist and selfless observation of any importance to a question of happiness?

Schopenhauer argues that the amount of happiness a person is able to experience is dependent on its own individual abilities. More precisely, the mental abilities to practice selfless observation. A person who is able to practice selfless observation is also able to experience an elevated sense of pleasure. In Houellebecq essay the following words of Schopenhauer are used to address the importance of individuality on the possibility of happiness: 'Door zijn individualiteit is de maat van het geluk dat hij kan kennen van tevoren bepaald. Vooral zijn gevoeligheid voor verheven genot is door de grenzen van zijn geestvermogens eens en vooral vastgelegd.'¹⁰ A strange paradox reveals itself. Even though selfless observation is meant to transcend individuality, the individual is completely dependent on its individual abilities to practice selfless observation in the first place. In other words, not everyone is able to experience the elevated pleasures of the mind.

The majority of people gain a sense of happiness by pleasuring their senses. The highest form of pleasure is unreachable, namely a pleasure of the mind. A quote from Schopenhauer supports this standpoint: 'Want de hoogste, meest gevarieerde en

⁷ Houellebecq, *In aanwezigheid van Schopenhauer*, chap. 2, p.6 (All passages from Schopenhauer quoted in this essay are selected by Houellebecq and quoted in his essay).

⁸ Ibidem, chap. 2, p.8.

⁹ Ibidem, chap. 2, p.11.

¹⁰ Ibidem, chap. 5, p.19.

langdurigste genietingen die er zijn, zijn geestelijke, hoe anders we daar in onze jeugd ook over mogen denken. Die genietingen hangen echter grotendeels van de kracht van de geest af. Hieruit blijkt dus hoezeer ons geluk afhangt van wat we zijn, van onze individualiteit.’¹¹ In other words, just a small selection of the human population is able to escape the will to live by practicing selfless observation. These people possess a certain individuality that enables them to enjoy their own mental abilities. According to Schopenhauer, the majority of people gain their sense of happiness from: ‘pleasuring the senses, family life, social events and vulgar recreation’.¹²

Houellebecq feels pity for those who lack the right individuality. The fate of these people is worsened by modern society, since modern society emphasizes material life. The chances of simply pleasuring the senses have been complicated according to him: ‘Niet zonder droefheid lezen we hier over de eenvoudige genoegens van de gewone man (‘knus en onbekommerd gezinsleven, eenvoudige gezelligheid’), zozeer ervaren we die in onze moderne samenleving als een *verloren paradijs*; zelfs het zinnelijk genot komt steeds verder onder druk te staan. En al die bronnen van geluk nemen zeker niet af ten gunste van “de hoogste genietingen die er zijn, de geestelijke”, maar eerder ten gunste van een streven dat Schopenhauer als een valkuil beschouwt: het verwerven van geld en roem (wat je hebt, wat je voorstelt) [...] deze ene constatering is al voldoende om de moderne samenleving te verwerpen.’¹³

Thus, the artistic individual has higher chances of being happy in contemporary society according to Houellebecq. The artistic individual is less dependent on happiness from sensual pleasure, and less dependent on a society which has complicated happiness deriving from the senses. The majority of individuals is suffering under the will to live. Houellebecq argues that sensual pleasure is placed under pressure in contemporary society, what does he mean by that? In his earlier work (*Whatever and the Elementary Particles*) the spirit of May 1968 is to blame, which induced sexual freedom on the crumbling institute of marriage. Another force that causes devastation is neoliberalism and its effects on society. Are there any people left, besides the artist, who are still able to enjoy life in contemporary society? A declining amount of ‘common people’ still gain their happiness from pleasuring their senses.

¹¹ Ibidem, chap. 5, 22.

¹² Ibidem, chap. 5, 20.

¹³ Ibidem, chap. 5, 24.

Those who possess beauty and youthfulness have the possibility to saturate their senses, unlike those who are unattractive or old. Schopenhauer does not envy those who are merely enjoying their senses: 'Uiterlijke bronnen van geluk zijn hoogst vergankelijk en kunnen onder zelfs de meest gunstige omstandigheden gemakkelijk haperen. Als we ouder worden raken ze onherroepelijk bijna alleemaal uitgeput: liefde, grapjes, reis-en rijlust, geschiktheid voor het gezelschapsleven. Dan komt het er meer dan ooit op aan wat iemand aan zichzelf heeft. Maar ook in elke andere levensfase is en blijft het de enige ware, duurzame bron van geluk.'¹⁴

Concluding, an elite of beautiful people and artists have the possibility to become happy in contemporary society. However, even the artistic individual, who is able to enjoy its mental capabilities, is not always that fortunate. This artistic individual is more sensitive to pain than others; pain will be experienced on a higher degree because of this sensitivity. Furthermore, this individual is often condemned to a lonely life, since he does not enjoy the sensual pleasure which others embrace, alienation is lurking.¹⁵ Thus, while the artistic individual could suffer from alienation and its own sensitivity, the 'common person' will suffer from the will to live. The common person is busy in a constant fight against boredom and a painful longing, a lifelong desire of finding ways to stimulate the senses. Those who are young and beautiful are doing well for the time being. The addition of Houellebecq to the logic of Schopenhauer is that he stresses the pressure on sensual pleasure in contemporary society. Experiencing happiness has therefore become more difficult for the majority of people. This majority is only capable of experiencing the sensual kind of pleasure.

The will of Labrouste

Labrouste is going through a miserable relationship with Yuzu, thinking about ways to leave this toxic relationship behind is one of his major desires. This first desire finds expression when he meets two girls who need help alongside a road in Spain. He believes one of those girls could genuinely make him happy, instead he is stuck with Yuzu. After finally leaving Yuzu, Labrouste starts to feel alone and this sense of loneliness causes him to think about the relations with people he had in the past. The first person he approaches is his former lover named Claire. After Claire we are introduced in Labrouste's love affair with Kate and

¹⁴ Houellebecq, *In aanwezigheid van Schopenhauer*, chap. 5, 42.

¹⁵ Ibidem, chap. 5, 47.

his friendship with Aymeric. The last important character is Labrouste's last major loved one: Camille. It is not stated explicitly in the novel why Labrouste is going through his past relations. However, it could be argued that Labrouste desires a meaningful human connection, something he did not experience during his relationship with Yuzu; the final chapter of the novel in the form of an epilogue supports this argument. This epilogue treats indications from God which are supposed to lead us into the right direction during life. Instead, Labrouste has ignored these indications from above, he has ignored the indications which direct us to love. He should have recognized the value of love, something he failed to achieve, being tempted by the unlimited options of life and ignoring the indications: 'Die golven van liefde die in onze borst opzwellen en ons de adem benemen, die ingevingen en extases waar onze biologische natuur, onze eenvoudige primatenstatus geen verklaring voor kan bieden, zijn uitzonderlijk heldere tekenen.'¹⁶

Fortunately for Labrouste, he still has the opportunity to be reunited with Camille. When Labrouste finds out where his former lover Camille lives, his second desire becomes clear: being reunited with her. There is only one hurdle between Labrouste and his desire: her son. The protagonist starts to believe he should get rid of her son, by murdering him. The third desire of Labrouste is thus murdering Camille's son in order to regain her love, to regain a meaningful human relationship. The murder attempt fails, he sinks in a state of hopelessness; anti-depressants make his life more bearable, while he fantasies about his final desire: suicide. The following sections will focus on the use of the anti-depressant Captorix and suicidal thoughts in relation with the philosophy of Schopenhauer. It will be argued that using Captorix has worsened Labrouste's chances on happiness.

Introducing Captorix

Why is Labrouste using Captorix in the first place? The protagonist is filled with doubts about happiness and his own state of mind during his period of loneliness after leaving Yuzu. He eventually visits a psychiatrist because he believes his own behaviour is abnormal to some extent, while his state of mind is actually a manifestation of the Schopenhauerian ideal state: experiencing a lack of desires. The psychiatrist does not have the same perspective on happiness as Schopenhauer, prescribing him a recipe of anti-depressants.

¹⁶ Michel Houellebecq, *Serotonine* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2019), 303.

Thus, Labrouste is introduced to Captorix after he left Yuzu behind and moved into a hotel himself. His mood improves temporarily when he finds a good restaurant in the neighbourhood (a more detailed study on the importance of food will be given in chapter two). However, Labrouste finds himself lonely, soon after his arrival in the hotel, asking the following question: 'Was ik in staat eenzaam gelukkig te zijn? Ik dacht van niet.'¹⁷ After visiting a supermarket and being impressed by the choices of food, which again raises his mood, he asks himself a question of happiness again: Was ik nu echt zo ongelukkig? The protagonist describes his mood as sad but stable, a sadness that does not seem to get worse or better.¹⁸ It could be argued that Labrouste experiences the ideal state of mind as described by Schopenhauer, namely a state of mind which lacks any desire. Schopenhauer states: 'De wil keert zich voortaan van het leven af; hij huivert voor de genietingen waarin hij de bevestiging van het leven herkent. De mens geraakt in een toestand van vrijwillige berusting, van resignatie, van waarachtige gelatenheid en van totale willoosheid.'¹⁹ However, Labrouste is not sure whether a lack of desire is a healthy state of mind. He knows that some thinkers regard a lack of desire as enviable but others describe this situation as sickly and unhealthy, he is unable to make a clear standpoint in this 'classical debate'.

The state of his body and not his state of mind is eventually the turning point which makes him visit a psychiatrist. He experiences a disinterest in taking care of his body, loathing the process of bathing and brushing his teeth, even expressing a wish to get rid of his body: 'Om eerlijk te zijn had ik het liefst geen lichaam meer willen hebben, het idee om een lichaam te hebben en daar aandacht en zorg aan te moeten besteden vond ik steeds ondraaglijker worden'.²⁰ The latter does not mean Labrouste wishes to commit suicide, on the contrary, it expresses the ideal approach towards the body as described by Schopenhauer, though he does not recognize his own line of reasoning as such. Schopenhauer states the following about the wish to get rid of the body: 'Net zoals hij de wil zelf mortificeert, zo mortificeert hij ook de zichtbaarheid, de objectiviteit ervan, het lichaam.'²¹ This statement means that someone could deny the will on a mental level by

¹⁷ Houellebecq, *Serotonine*, 75.

¹⁸ Ibidem, 78.

¹⁹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *De wereld als wil en voorstelling*, (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Wereldbibliotheek, 1997) 546.

²⁰ Houellebecq, *Serotonine*, 78.

²¹ Schopenhauer, *De wereld als wil en voorstelling*, 549.

suppressing any desire and embracing pain, but the body also gives expression to the will since the body has its own needs; suppressing the needs of the body is part of the process of denying the will. Confused by his lack of interest towards his body, Labrouste decides to visit a psychiatrist and wonders if he is abnormal. The Schopenhauerian ideal state of mind, a complete lack of desire regarding the mind and the body, is apparently confusing enough and worth a visit to the psychiatrist.

During the psychiatric visit he tells his doctor about his current situation and the psychiatrist responds in the following manner: 'Toen ik mijn leven van de laatste tijd voor hem had samengevat, beaamde hij dat ik inderdaad echt hulp nodig had, en hij vroeg me of ik weleens aan zelfmoord dacht. Nee, antwoordde ik, de dood interesseert me niet. Hij onderdrukte een ontevreden grimas en ging op bitse toon verder; hij vond me duidelijk niet sympathiek: er bestond een antidepressivum van een nieuwe generatie'.²² This quote is interesting in two ways: the approach towards death and the disappointment on part of the psychiatrist. Labrouste no longer experiences any desire, even suicide and death do not interest him. In the logic of Schopenhauer, death only confirms what everyone should be striving for, namely a repression of desires, a repression of the will to live; a lack of fear towards death thus seems to be a healthy state of mind. Schopenhauer states the following about death and the will: 'Wanneer de dood zich ten slotte meldt en deze verschijning van de wil opheft – een verschijning waarvan het wezen hier, door de vrijwillige ontkenning van zichzelf, al lang is afgestorven, op een zwakke rest na die zich als het leven van dit lichaam manifesteert – dan is die dood, als langverwachte verlossing hoogst welkom en wordt hij met blij gemoed aanvaard.'²³ In other words, Labrouste is on the right path by showing no special interest towards death, but the psychiatrist does not seem to agree.

Furthermore, the response of the psychiatrist can be called inappropriate, reacting with disappointment to Labrouste's lack of interest towards death. It is unclear why the psychiatrist is actually disappointed; perhaps he is disappointed that Labrouste is not a heavy case, maybe prescribing Captorix generates more income, or he simply does not like Labrouste. In any case, the attitude of the psychiatrist is unprofessional. The ease with which the psychiatrist prescribes anti-depressants witnesses a shortcoming in the psychiatric system; the following statement made by Labrouste supports this standpoint: 'De conclusie

²² Houellebecq, *Serotonine*, 79.

²³ Schopenhauer, *De wereld als wil en voorstelling*, 550.

die zich gaandeweg opdrong was dat de geneeskunde op deze terreinen grotendeels in het duister tastte en dat antidepressiva deel uitmaakten van de grote groep medicijnen die werkten (of niet) zonder dat precies duidelijk was waarom.²⁴ Is Houellebecq criticizing the existing mentality towards anti-depressants in western society?

On suicide and the refusal to shoot

In the aftermath of Labrouste's failed murder attempt on the son of Camille, he experiences a lack of desire, feeling no need for social contact nor does the sight of attractive young women cause any excitement or lust. He does feel a great amount of sadness. His psychiatrist makes him aware of the very high doses of the stress hormone cortisol in his body. He advises Labrouste to gradually stop using Captorix and start visiting escort girls in order to raise the amount of dopamine and endorphins. Instead of listening to the advice of his psychiatrist, Labrouste just watches television, he has completely lost his will to live. On top of his misery, a smoking-ban will be implemented in his hotel; being forced to leave his hotel, he starts to seek a place to end his suffering: 'Ik bevond me dus in de fase waarin het gewonde oude dier, dat zich dodelijk getroffen voelt, een rustplaats zoekt om er zijn leven te beëindigen.'²⁵ The new place of residence Labrouste is seeking, should provide a large amount of anonymity and end all hope on the possibility of life. He is able to find such a place in the outskirts of Paris.²⁶ At this place he starts developing concrete ideas on how to carry out his suicide, but he is mentally not entirely ready yet, needing a couple more months, and therefore another recipe of Captorix. The actual suicide of Labrouste is not described in the novel, ending with some final thoughts on anti-depressants and the importance of passions. A more detailed study about the end of the novel and the reason why the actual suicide is not described, will be given in the fourth chapter.

To what extent is this retreat from life and fantasising about suicide a manifestation of Schopenhauerian thought? Schopenhauer addresses the importance of suffering: one should embrace the process of suffering, since suffering implicates that the will to live still exists. When somebody suffers, it means this individual is still desiring; pain can be used to break the will and the idea of individual needs in the logic of Schopenhauer: 'Zo neemt hij

²⁴ Houellebecq, *Serotonine*, 81.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 285.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 287.

zijn toevlucht tot vasten, ja zelfs tot kastijding en zelfpijniging, om door voortdurend ontberen en lijden de wil meer en meer te breken en te doden.'²⁷ Labrouste on the other hand is not able to embrace his pain and transcend his individual needs, on the contrary he numbs his pain to a bearable level by using Captorix. Even during Labrouste his fantasies about suicide, he fears the mental pain. He worries over the amount of Captorix he possesses, he is not ready to commit suicide on an immediate basis and does not want to suffer too much: 'Je moet het lijden niet boven een bepaald niveau uit laten komen anders sla je volledig door.'²⁸ In other words, Labrouste fears his own pain and does the opposite of Schopenhauer's described path to a state of ascetism (abhorrence and refusal to embody the will to live).²⁹

Furthermore, the suicide plans of Labrouste are completely in contrast with the philosophy of Schopenhauer. Suicide is a very strong confirmation of the will to live according to Schopenhauer, since the individual considering suicide is dissatisfied with the circumstances of his life and is not able to embrace the difficulties of life. Instead of confirming the will to live, one should deny the embodiment of the will and embrace suffering: 'De heftigheid waarmee hij het leven wil en tegen de belemmering daarvan, namelijk het lijden, tekeergaat, zet hem ertoe aan zichzelf te vernietigen.'³⁰ Labrouste deeply desires Camille and the life she would give him, namely a family and a loving relationship. One of the activities that show a lasting will to live is the creation of a 'wall full of pictures': he gathers three thousand pictures of his life and places them on a wall in his apartment, including pictures with Camille and Kate. This action is exemplary of Labrouste's ongoing desire to live which he is not able to avert, hence the choice of suicide.

Thus, suicide and numbing pain by using anti-depressants are not manifestations of Schopenhauerian thought; how about the choice of not murdering the son of Camille, which could have fulfilled his biggest desire? In first instance Labrouste has the following line of reasoning: he has the right to kill the son of Camille since he is able to empathize with him. Labrouste gets this idea on empathy while remembering his own childhood happiness: 'ik was destijds misschien vijf jaar oud, iets ouder dan Camilles zoon, maar ik zag het leven toen als een reeks van geluuksmomenten die alleen maar langer kon worden, in de toekomst

²⁷ Schopenhauer, *De wereld als wil en voorstelling*, 549.

²⁸ Houellebecq, *Serotonine*, 301.

²⁹ Schopenhauer, *De wereld als wil en voorstelling*, 547.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 570.

alleen maar aanleiding kon geven tot steeds gevarieerdere en grotere geluksmomenten, en toen die herinnering weer bij me bovenkwam wist ik dat ik Camilles zoon begreep, dat ik me in hem kon verplaatsen, en dat ik daarom het recht had om hem te doden.³¹ In other words, Labrouste recognizes the innocence of childhood happiness, a state of mind he once experienced himself; he also knows about the disappointment which may develop in the later stages of life, murdering the son of Camille during his peak of happiness is therefore not necessarily a bad thing: thereby preventing the further development of suffering during maturity, as happened in his own life.

The moment Labrouste targets his sniper rifle on the son of Camille, they both experience a deep motionlessness: 'Zijn roerloosheid werd alleen geëvenaard door de mijne,' this goes on for about twenty minutes before he quits aiming at his target.³² Was Labrouste experiencing a moment of selfless observation, as described by Schopenhauer, during this period of motionlessness? The son of Camille already caused a spark of empathy as mentioned, there is a possibility that Labrouste was transcending his own individuality while focusing and aiming on his target. The choice of not acting according to his major desire is deeply Schopenhauerian, refusing the embodiment of the will and transcending his own individuality. Schopenhauer states the following about the sacrifice of individuality during the moment of selfless observation: 'Wanneer de sluiters van iemands ogen wordt weggenomen [...] en daardoor niet alleen tot het uiterste toe behulpzaam is maar zelf bereid is om zijn eigen individualiteit op te offeren als daarmee meerdere andere individuen kunnen worden gered – dan is het noodzakelijk gevolg daarvan dat zo iemand, die in alle wezens zichzelf, zijn diepste en ware ik herkent, ook het eindeloze lijden van al wat leeft als het zijne moet gaan beschouwen, zodat hij ten slotte de smart van heel de wereld op zijn schouders neemt. Hem is geen lijden meer vreemd.'³³ The refusal of Labrouste to act according to his desire contains the possibility that he might change as a person. He might recognize the will in all living organisms, reaching a state of ascetism. However, Labrouste makes a crucial mistake that prevents him from reaching this Schopenhauerian state of mind.

³¹ Houellebecq, *Serotonine*, 261.

³² Ibidem, 264.

³³ Schopenhauer, *De wereld als wil en voorstelling*, 545.

After the consciously failed murdering attempt, he feels hopeless but still thinks that his mental situation will improve, using the following words: ‘tegen hoop op hoop geloven’.³⁴ Instead of grasping this small amount of hope and embracing his suffering, his first plan is to visit doctor Azote to enlarge his doses of anti-depressants, even naming this increase of Captorix his: ‘elementaire overlevingsmaatregel’.³⁵ This proves to be a crucial mistake using the logic of Schopenhauer, since Labrouste has denied the will by not murdering the son of Camille and does retire from social life, but is not able to make the final step towards the state of ascetism, as praised by Schopenhauer. Labrouste chooses to numb his suffering down to a bearable level with medication, while Schopenhauer advises a unhindered manifestation of the will in order to defeat it: ‘Daarom is er maar één weg die tot heil leidt, namelijk dat de wil ongehinderd verschijnt, zodat hij in deze verschijning zijn eigen wezen kan *herkennen*. Alleen als gevolg van deze kennis kan de wil zichzelf opheffen en daarmee ook een einde maken aan het lijden, dat onlosmakelijk verbonden is met de verschijning van de wil. Nogmaals, dit is niet mogelijk door middel van fysiek geweld (zelfmoord).’³⁶ Labrouste is not able to deny his desires completely therefore he is feeling pain; instead of seeking the root of his suffering, he chooses to make the pain bearable by using Captorix.

The will of Aymeric

Labrouste met Aymeric during college, he graduated as an agricultural engineer and became a farmer on the land of his father. Aymeric does not want to run his business using the methods of intensive cattle farming, instead he tries to retain some of the traditional ways of farming, therefore rejecting an automatic milking system and letting his cattle graze outside in the meadows, instead of feeding them with corn. Retaining this traditional approach has its financial downsides, the business is losing money every year. In order to generate more income, he and his wife Cécile made the plan to use parts of his land to construct and rent out hotel rooms. Returning to Schopenhauer, the following question can be asked: since living in a traditional agricultural way is Aymeric’s first desire, what is holding him back? He is not able to achieve his goal because of the miserable position of the French

³⁴ Houellebecq, *Serotonine*, 266.

³⁵ Ibidem, 267.

³⁶ Schopenhauer, *De wereld als wil en voorstelling*, 573.

farmer: foreign investors buy large parcels of land and future perspectives do not look much brighter; a possible abolition of the milk quota, executed by the European Union, will be devastating for the French farmer. Fifteen years later Aymeric is abandoned by his wife; Cécile now lives in London with their daughters, and has a relationship with a pianist while Aymeric is drinking his sorrows away. Labrouste suggests he should find himself a wife that still respects the life on the country side, a girl from Moldova or Southeast Asia, even calling him 'the absolute male ideal for some women'.³⁷

Family life can be regarded as Aymeric's second desire, something he lost because of the hardships in the countryside; he longs for his daughters and regards his life as ruined after Cécile left him. Furthermore, he thinks that Cécile left him because women need culture, which is something the countryside lacks; she met a pianist who performs all over the world, providing her with the life Aymeric was unable to give. His financial position did not improve either over the years; all the farmers in the region are suffering under the reduction of the milk price. Labrouste tries to explain the hopelessness of the situation to Aymeric: 'Het aantal boeren is in Frankrijk de laatste vijftig jaar drastisch gedaald, maar het is nog niet genoeg gedaald. Het moet nog met de helft of twee derde omlaag om op Europees standaardniveau te komen, het standaardniveau van Denemarken en Nederland .. Nu zijn er iets meer dan zestigduizend melkveehouders; over vijftien jaar zijn er volgens mij nog twintigduizend over'.³⁸ Thus, the two desires of Aymeric cannot be realized, his business will go bankrupt because of neoliberal policy and he lost his family due the temptations of cultural life; he is not able to handle his sufferings and commits a 'heroic' suicide. He does not give expression towards a Schopenhauerian ideal state of mind. He commits suicide just like Labrouste, because he desires too much (even though Labrouste's suicide is not described).

There are multiple similarities between Aymeric and Labrouste. Labrouste describes himself as an old wounded animal, when looking for a new apartment where he can commit suicide. Labrouste uses the same words to describe Aymeric: 'Waarom zou je een oud verslagen mannetjesdier proberen te redden? We bevonden ons ongeveer op hetzelfde punt, onze lotsbestemming was verschillend maar het einde vergelijkbaar'.³⁹ Both men long

³⁷ Houellebecq, *Serotonine*, 179.

³⁸ Ibidem, 214.

³⁹ Houellebecq, *Serotonine*, 180.

for a loving relationship with a woman, something which proves to be impossible. Aymeric has lost his wife to a 'cultured' pianist. Labrouste's relationships failed because he cheated, in case of Camille and Kate, and because Claire refused to move out of Paris. One could argue that all relationships of Labrouste failed because of 'cultural' causes. Claire refused to move out of Paris because of her acting career. Labrouste describes her acting career and cultural activities in a sneering way: 'wat zou het toneel zijn zonder bobo's [...] het ergste was ongetwijfeld toen ze een uur lang uit Maurice Blanchot moest voorlezen op France Culture, ze had nooit gedacht zei ze dat er zulke troep bestond.'⁴⁰ In other words, the cultural sector provides her with the false hope of a future career in acting, which ultimately prevented their relationship.

In case of Camille and Kate (both relationships ended because of cheating), the culture of unlimited options is to blame: 'Ik had een vrouw gelukkig kunnen maken. Of nou ja, twee [...] Zijn we gezwicht voor de illusies van individuele vrijheid, open leven, onbegrensde mogelijkheden?'⁴¹ Amar Ruth studied happiness in the works of Houellebecq, she emphasised the importance of three themes in regards to the subject of happiness in Houellebecq: the importance of duty, self-knowledge and love. A sense of duty is necessary in order to continuously stimulate the will to live. When a person feels obliged to take care of something in need (a pet, a child), a desire will arise which cannot be fulfilled on an immediate basis, since the obligation to take care of the other will continue to exist on the long term. Moreover, taking care of something also gives some sense of fulfilment. Thus, a form of duty creates a lasting desire, providing fulfilment every time the duty is practiced but cannot be fulfilled completely, thereby preventing the emergence of boredom. However, duty in the works of Houellebecq is often undermined by passions in other areas according to Ruth. Namely, passions with regards to the body, beauty and money. Western hedonistic culture emphasises the importance of instant pleasure, while duty often requires a sacrifice of personal desires. A culture of instant pleasure undermines a possible source of happiness in the logic of Ruth.⁴² This logic can be applied on *Serotonin*. Labrouste had the duty to invest in his relationships with Camille and Kate, but he yielded for other temptations. He was passionate about the beauty of other women, failing his duty twice

⁴⁰ Ibidem, 93.

⁴¹ Ibidem, 303.

⁴² Amar Ruth, "Michel Houellebecq : la possibilité du bonheur dans l'ère du vide," *Les Lettres romanes* 72, no. 1-2 (2018), 164.

towards his girlfriends. Labrouste himself blames culture, the culture of unlimited options, or as Amar Ruth calls it the hedonistic western culture of instant pleasures.

Labrouste finally ends up with Yuzu, whom is also ingrained in 'cultural' life. Yuzu works for the Maison de la Culture du Japon, her social circle consists of fashion designers and talent scouts, she creates exhibitions with provoking art, and she has sexual escapades with men from the art scene: 'Over het algemeen waren het kunstenaars (maar niet echt gedoemde kunstenaars, eerder het tegendeel om precies te zijn), soms culturele beleidsmakers.'⁴³ In Houellebecq's essay, *En présence de Schopenhauer*, the true artist is called passive. Even worse, the true artist is a passive loser: 'Zo zal een ambitieus, actief en sociabel individu dat de ambitie heeft om carrière te maken in de kunst, daar over het algemeen nooit in slagen; de erepalm valt toe aan haast amorfe minkukels die van meet af aan tot de status van loser voorbestemd lijken.'⁴⁴ Yuzu sleeps with men who are not doomed artists. As mentioned earlier, art is made by those who possess the mental abilities to practice selfless observation, at least according to Houellebecq. Yuzu on the other hand surrounds herself with artists who are not doomed, these people are not artists from Houellebecq's point of view, they are not passive losers. The final similarity between Aymeric and Labrouste are the words used to describe the hopelessness of their situation: '*Nacht ohne Ende*'.⁴⁵ Concluding, we see the following similarities between Aymeric and Labrouste: the longing for a woman, the impossibility to embrace their suffering hence a choice of suicide, the negative impact of culture, and the used rhetoric to describe their situation. Both characters are connected through their mutual passion for agriculture and the countryside and both characters disagree with the existing agricultural policy. Aymeric and Labrouste complement each other. The next chapter will continue on the longing for a woman, the longing for love; since this desire cannot be fulfilled, repression takes place.

⁴³ Houellebecq, *Serotonine*, 57.

⁴⁴ Houellebecq, *In aanwezigheid van Schopenhauer*, chap. 2, p.10.

⁴⁵ Houellebecq, *Serotonine*, 216.

Chapter 2

The Freudian oral phase in *Serotonin*: the presence of food and the absence of love

The name of Sigmund Freud appears twice in the *Serotonin*, accompanied with references to the 'oral phase'. The references are made by Labrouste, who is amazed by the high quantity of cooking shows on television. The first time the oral phase is mentioned, there is still some doubt in Labrouste's line of thinking: 'Frankrijk en misschien wel het hele Westen, was ongetwijfeld hard op weg om terug te keren naar de *orale fase*, in de termen van de Oostenrijkse pias.'⁴⁶ The second time Labrouste mentions the oral phase, he is completely sure of his Freudian observation; Labrouste is struck by his own lust for food and makes the following remark: 'Ik bestelde iets te eten, een omelet met aardappels en drie Leffes hielpen me een beetje bij zinnen te komen, ja het Westen keerde absoluut terug naar de orale fase.'⁴⁷ On first sight, the appearance of Freud's oral phase does not seem to be of great importance in the novel. However, the idea of the oral phase is present throughout the whole novel. This chapter will clarify the meaning of Freud's theory and explain the overlap with Houellebecq's vision on sexuality.

Freud describes his ideas on sexuality in relation to childhood in his 1905 text: *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie*. Especially important for this thesis is the chapter about the treatise on infantile sexuality. In this chapter, Freud explains why early childhood behaviour should be regarded as an act of sexuality. Breastfeeding originally functions to feed the child; Freud argues that sucking on the mother's chest also creates lustful feelings from the part of the child. The child lips function like an erogenous zone during the breastfeeding period, being stimulated by the sensations from the warm milk.⁴⁸ Even after the breastfeeding period, the child still feels the need to stimulate the erogenous zone of the lips. The child is able to satisfy this need by sucking on its own fingers (or other surrogates). Thus, the need to stimulate the lips has become separated from its original feeding background. Since the

⁴⁶ Houellebecq, *Serotonine*, 280.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, 286.

⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Drie verhandelingen over de theorie van de seksualiteit* (Nijmegen: Uitgeverij Vantilt, 2017), 46.

child no longer relies on its mother for stimulation, it has become 'auto-erotic', being able to find satisfaction by using its own body.⁴⁹

Consequences of the lips functioning as an erogenous zone during childhood, can still be present at later age during maturity. A strong urge towards smoking, drinking and a preference towards intense kissing, are a result of the lips still being intact as an erogenous zone during maturity. In some cases, the erogenous function of the lips is repressed during maturity, this eventually leads to urges of excessive eating: 'Omdat de lippen een gemeenschappelijke zone vormen, zal de verdringing overslaan op de drift tot voedselopname. Al mijn patiëntes met eetstoornissen [...] waren in hun kinderjaren verwoede sabbelaarsters geweest.'⁵⁰ Moreover, there is a possibility of the lips becoming even more important than other erogenous zones: in case the actual genital parts are repressed, other erogenous zones will take over their role. In other words, a lack of sexual intercourse by using the genital parts, will lead to a more important role of other erogenous zones, such as the lips.⁵¹ A situation unfolds were the lips develop into the most important erogenous zone, while not being recognized as such, which leads to repression and therefore excessive eating habits. Dr. Boysen explains that in the works of Houellebecq an unbearable amount of desire is present, while at the same time the possibilities of satisfaction are limited: 'The intense sexualization or pornification of mass culture after the sixties means that desire has increased exponentially, while satisfaction and/or pleasure have remained unchanged.'⁵² People are often exposed to sexual temptations against their will. When applying the logic of both Boysen and Freud on the French society in *Serotonin*, we are able to recognize a wide spread repression of the genital parts, while people are exposed to many sexual temptations during everyday life. Furthermore, not everyone is able to recognize the lips as an erogenous zone which causes another form of repression; a connection is made with the excessive presence of food in the novel.

Thus, the lips functioning as an erogenous zone are a characteristic of the infantile sexuality. The infantile sexuality is the first stage a human being goes through when developing into a sexually healthy functioning adult. The first stage of infantile sexuality is characterized by 'primary narcissism'. During the different stages a transition will take place

⁴⁹ Ibidem, 46.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, 47.

⁵¹ Ibidem, 48.

⁵² Boysen, "Houellebecq's Priapism," 480.

that leads to 'object libido'. In other words, the development of a self-oriented child (primary narcissism) into a sexually healthy functioning adult (object libido). At the beginning stage of primary narcissism, the infant is described as a bundle of unorganized urges. The infant uses everything that it encounters to satisfy these unorganized urges. When the infant starts to develop, it is able to channel its urges through love. Other human beings start to play a central role, the urges have become organized; a healthy functioning ego is the result of this transition, the individual is no longer merely oriented on self-satisfaction.⁵³ Thus, when Labrouste argues that French society is returning at the oral phase, he also refers to the state of primary narcissism: the inability to love other persons. A return of the French or all the western societies at the oral phase, implies that a widespread infantile expression of sexuality is taking place. Or more specifically, a widespread impossibility of love between persons. Moreover, the lips have become important as an erogenous zone and people suffer from a unhealthy sexual ego, mainly focused on self-satisfaction.

A first example of the oral phase in *Serotonin*, is the excessive presence of food in the novel combined with a glorification of the supermarket. As mentioned, a repression of the lips as an erogenous zone will lead to the excessive intake of food. *Carrefour City* is the first supermarket which receives praise, more specifically because of the high degree of product range: eight different types of Hummus are sold, including the rare 'msabbaha'.⁵⁴ Labrouste's praise of the second supermarket concerns the outstanding logistic organisation. His enthusiasm rises to high levels when encountering a *Centre Leclerc*, a so called hypermarket, and being baffled by the logistics which enable a product range of such high diversity. He uses verses from a poem by Charles Baudelaire to honour the logistic capabilities of the hypermarket:

*'Zie slapend in de grachten
Vaartuigen daar wachten
Die van reisverlangen branden;
Om elk van jouw grillen
Gewillig te stillen
Gaan zij naar de verste landen.'*⁵⁵

⁵³ Antoon Braeckman, Bart Raymaekers, Gerd van Riel, *Wijsbegeerte* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij LannooCampus, 2012), 204.

⁵⁴ Houellebecq, *Serotonine*, 76.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, 236 (the original quote is from "L'invitation au voyage").

This poem originally describes an invitation towards a loved one, to travel to distant countries. Houellebecq uses verses of this poem in an ironic manner: by describing the protagonist love for food and not for a person.

Another example of the excessive presence of food, is the high detailed description of meals. When dining together with Claire their choice of food returns several times and is described extensively: 'Ik koos uiteindelijk voor een ovenschotelletje van Bourgondische slakken met knoflookboter, en daarna de in olijfolie gebakken sint-Jakobsvruchten met tagliatelle [...] De geglaceerde meringuetaart met frambozencoulis trok onmiddellijk mijn aandacht; Claire koos voor de soesjes met warme chocoladesaus een klassieker'.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the morning Labrouste left Yuzu behind; the first thing he does is having an extensive breakfast. The impossibility of a loving relationship with Yuzu is soon forgotten by the prospect of food. A failed relationship (repression of both the genital parts and the lips) is compensated by auto-erotic behaviour, excessive eating. 'De menukaart van het etablissement stemde me erg enthousiast [...] Kortom, ik voelde dat ik niet zomaar een paar gelukkige uren, maar hele gelukkige dagen, weken of zelfs Jaren in dat etablissement zou gaan doorbrengen.'⁵⁷

A second example of a return at the oral phase is the excessive presence of oral sex in the shape of fellatio. When the lips still function an erogenous during maturity, a strong urge towards smoking, drinking and a preference towards intense kissing, are the result. Even though fellatio is not described by Freud in his chapter about infantile sexuality, fellatio could be an expression of the oral phase. Freud states about the replacing stimuli: 'Het gaat erom het geprojecteerde prikkelgevoel in de erogene zone te vervangen door die uitwendige prikkel die dit prikkelgevoel opheft door de bevredigingssensatie te veroorzaken. Deze uitwendige prikkel zal meestal bestaan uit een met het zuigen vergelijkbare manipulatie.'⁵⁸ It should be noted that another characteristic of the infantile sexuality is the term: auto-erotic (being able to find satisfaction by using one's own body). The auto-erotic nature implies that the replacing stimulus takes shape in either: thumb sucking during childhood, or through food, smoking and drinking during maturity. Is sexual conduct with another person not part of the replacing stimuli? The auto-erotic satisfaction seems rather contradictory, since Freud

⁵⁶ Ibidem, 106.

⁵⁷ Ibidem, 73.

⁵⁸ Ibidem, 49.

also describes a preference for intensive kissing as a characteristic of the oral phase during maturity. Apparently sexual conduct with another person can also be part of the oral phase; fellatio should therefore not be excluded.

Examples of fellatio in *Serotonin* support the idea that the excessive presence of oral sex, could be regarded as some sort of warning on the existing state of mind, namely a return at the loveless period of infantile sexuality. Labrouste possesses two pictures that depict his great love Camille. On the first picture Camille looks intensely happy, Labrouste being the cause of her happiness. There is a meaningful and loving relationship between the couple. The other picture depicts Camille performing fellatio on Labrouste.⁵⁹ Are the two pictures depicting a contrast between happiness and love on the one hand, and a return to the loveless oral phase and infantile sexuality in the other? It is striking that Yuzu, whom Labrouste strongly dislikes, is an expert in fellatio: 'haar seksuele verrichtingen waren van heel hoog niveau, in het bijzonder op het cruciale terrein van de blowjob',⁶⁰ whereas the relationship between Labrouste and Yuzu is characterized by lovelessness and deceit. A third example of fellatio and the oral phase, is the impossibility of love between Labrouste and Claire. Claire wants to perform fellatio on Labrouste, who is unable to get an erection due to the use of Captorix. Next morning, Labrouste finds out Claire is an alcoholic, and again an extensive breakfast is being described. Thus, Claire is unable to perform fellatio, the lips as an erogenous zone are repressed. A replacing stimulus is found in alcohol and food, any indication of love or affection between the Claire and Labrouste seems unlikely: 'ik begon me waarschijnlijk ook af te vragen wat ik ooit in die vrouw had gezien.'⁶¹ Moreover, Claire's future as an alcoholic does not seem bright, she will die lonely and miserable according to Labrouste, deeply stuck in the loveless oral phase.

Smoking is a manifestation of the lips functioning as a erogenous zone during maturity according to Freud, and also the practice of intense kissing and the use of excessive alcohol. Labrouste is an avid smoker, leading to trouble when finding a hotel. A ban on smoking (repression of the lips) causes Labrouste to be creative; when he secretly smokes in his room the fire alarm should not go off. Eventually, he has to leave his last hotel because smoking will be forbidden, this is a direct cause for him to seek a place in the outskirts of

⁵⁹ Ibidem, 150.

⁶⁰ Ibidem, 55.

⁶¹ Ibidem, 106.

Paris, a place where he can finish his life in peace. Thus, it could be argued that smoking is repressed in *Serotonin* (the lips are repressed) leading to the excessive intake of food. In his new flat in the outskirts of Paris, Labrouste can smoke as much as he likes, still smoking is not mentioned during this final period. But he is still interested in cooking shows: 'Toch bleven er in het zenderaanbod van SFR nog altijd flink was pareltjes over, met name op het culinaire vlak, ik werd nu een goeie ouwe dikke goedzak'.⁶² When his interest in food also comes to an end, he loses all interest for life. Food is the last form of stimulus which can fulfil a Freudian sexual desire. Sensual pleasure can lead to happiness as mentioned in the chapter about Schopenhauer. When food as the last expression of sensual desire stops providing satisfaction, Labrouste loses all interest in the affairs of the living; this is symbolized by his aversion towards politics: 'Ik probeerde me te interesseren voor de maatschappelijke debatten, maar die periode was teleurstellend en kort.'⁶³ He tries to interest himself in literature, but comes to the conclusion that the 'greatest' European writers do not provide any solutions for his troubles, on the contrary they suffer from the same problems as he does: a lack of sensual pleasure and the impossibility of happiness: 'dat wat de schrijver nodig had, in tegenstelling tot wat de high society gelooft, absoluut geen intellectuele gesprekken waren maar 'luchtige liefdes met meisjes in bloei'.⁶⁴

Concluding, the lips undergo both expression and repression in the Freudian sense. A smoking ban, the use of Captorix which prevents fellatio, and the excessive presence of food, all indicate a repression of the lips, while on the other hand fellatio can also be regarded as an expression of the oral phase, an oral phase characterized by the impossibility of love. Houellebecq explores different ways in *Serotonin* on how to spread love or kindness. He uses ideas from the philosophy of Comte to overcome the lack of love.

⁶² Ibidem, 289.

⁶³ Ibidem, 289.

⁶⁴ Ibidem, 291.

Chapter 3

Comte in Houellebecq: the quest for kindness through the Religion of Humanity

This chapter will investigate in what ways Comtean thought can be recognized in both *Serotonin* and earlier work of Houellebecq. Comtean influences have been recognized by others who studied the work of Houellebecq. Amar Ruth emphasized the importance of kindness, more specifically the lack of kindness in the world created by Houellebecq. Comte advocated the importance of kindness in his Religion of Humanity. This chapter will use a text from 2018 named *Love, Order & Progress* by Michel Bourdeau, this text is a recent study about Comte and contains information over the Religion of Humanity. Another feature of Comtean thought in the works of Houellebecq is the creation of a new ontology based on science; Gavin Bowd addressed this issue already in 2002. Louis Betty wrote extensively about the creation of a new ontology in Houellebecq. In two articles of Betty multiple references are made to the work of Auguste Comte. With the help of these texts, the first part of this chapter will explain what Comtean ideas can be recognized in *The Elementary Particles* and *The Possibility of an Island*. The creation of a new ontology is present in these works. However, in Houellebecq's latest novels the presence of Comtean thinking becomes more subtle. After getting acquainted with some of the ideas of Comte, we will investigate Comtean thought in *Serotonin* in the second part of this chapter. Comte's Religion of Humanity is the central subject of inquiry. The Religion of Humanity contains ideas about spreading kindness and love in a systematised way, through a religious community. The Religion of Humanity also provides ideas about femininity and marriage; this chapter will argue that the character of Camille in *Serotonin* is an example of a Comtean ideal vision of womanhood.

Both Comte and Schopenhauer made a deep impact on the thinking of Houellebecq. He has called his acquaintance with the work of Auguste Comte: his 'second philosophical shock, after being introduced to Schopenhauer.'⁶⁵ He even renounced Schopenhauer in exchange for Comte: 'Schopenhauer of Comte? Ik heb uiteindelijk mijn keuze gemaakt en ben geleidelijk aan, met een soort ontvuchterd enthousiasme, positivist geworden; en al

⁶⁵ Houellebecq, *In aanwezigheid van Schopenhauer*, introductie, p.7.

even geleidelijk aan ben ik dus Schopenhaueriaan af geworden.⁶⁶ The second part of this chapter will also demonstrate that traces of both philosophers are present in *Serotonin*. Comtean and Schopenhauerian ideas about harmony and happiness might even compete with each other in the novel.

Traces of Comte in Houellebecq's earlier work: a new ontology

Betty argues that the general trajectory of Houellebecq's novels is a 'gradual disappointment with utopian, progressive and otherwise "historical" understandings of human destiny'⁶⁷. Houellebecq's earlier work is deeply Comtean according to Betty, while his more recent novels emphasize traditional values.⁶⁸ What makes Houellebecq's earlier work Comtean? In both *The Elementary Particles* and *The Possibility of an Island*, we find aspects of a society that yield to utopian ambitions can be recognized. More specifically, utopian ambitions of creating an empirical moral order, that takes the place of 'divine will or human rights as a foundation for ethics.'⁶⁹ Why is this form of utopia specifically Comtean according to Betty? 'Comte theorized that human civilization passed through three stages of historical development: the theological, associated with medieval Christian Europe; the metaphysical, associated with the philosophical foment of the Enlightenment and the discourse of rights that emerged during the Revolution; and the positive, when both theology and metaphysics were to yield epistemological priority to the empirical methods of science.'⁷⁰ In both the *Elementary Particles* and *The Possibility of an Island* a new moral order is (eventually) installed which has yielded to epistemological priorities. This new order is necessary because of historic developments: In the wake of May 1968, a culture of materialism and neoliberal market-thinking deprived western culture of Christian values. At least, this Houellebecqian central thought is recognized by Betty, who emphasizes that the following logic is central to Houellebecq's work: 'sexual liberation undermines the traditional basis of social cooperation and communal life, the family.'⁷¹ Both *The Elementary Particles* and *The Possibility of an*

⁶⁶ Ibidem, p.9.

⁶⁷ Louis Betty, "F&#% autonomy': Houellebecq, Submission, and Enlightenment's 'last dismaying dregs.'" *Modern & Contemporary France* 27, no. 1 (2019), 29.

⁶⁸ Ibidem, 36.

⁶⁹ Ibidem, 35.

⁷⁰ Louis Betty, "Michel Houellebecq and the Promise of Utopia: A Tale of Progressive Disenchantment." *French Forum* 40, no. 2-3 (2015), 99.

⁷¹ Betty, "F&#% autonomy," 32.

Island deal with the issue of reinstalling a form of communal life in a post-religious and neoliberal society; this community is shaped according to Comtean ideas.

The Elementary Particles is a novel that 'explores cloning as an antidote to post-religious civilizational exhaustion.'⁷² A character in *The Elementary Particles* named Djerzinski, comes with the idea of cloning as a solution to the 'burdens' of individuality. The idea behind Djerzinski's cloning plan is the following: 'De mensheid moest verdwijnen; de mensheid moest een ongeslachtelijke en onsterfelijke nieuwe soort voortbrengen die bevrijd zou zijn van individualiteit, isolement en verwording.'⁷³ Djerzinski suffered from his own individuality and subsequent isolation. In order to end this suffering, methods of science are used to create a new world order, based on a lack of individual desires. These new kind of utopian people will no longer be driven by egoism, cruelty and anger. A world without desires sounds purely Schopenhauerian. However, this new moral order is achieved by applying utopian and scientific elements, hence a Comtean influence can be recognized.

In *The Possibility of an Island*, a new kind society consisting of cloned humans is already in place. These new humans have reached a state of mind which lacks desire; Betty calls this state of mind 'genetically assisted asceticism'.⁷⁴ Furthermore, the clones both worship a religion named Elohimism and extra-terrestrials. Amar Ruth thinks that Elohimism is a Comtean form of religion, namely a religion of humanity. Ruth says the following: 'Comte recommends a religion of humanity, a religion without God where man must worship humanity itself.'⁷⁵ She continues about the form of religion in *The Possibility of an Island*: 'Mankind is a God who created itself through the faith and action of every one of his members. Faith is not absolute, only the acts of men allow to exist.'⁷⁶ Thus, the cloned humans worship an idea of ideal human behaviour: a religion of humanity.

However, the state of equality and lack of desires achieved through genetical assistance, do not necessarily lead to a better society. Betty recognises some sort of aversion towards utopian scientific solutions in *The Possibility of an Island*, which were absent earlier in *The Elementary Particles*: '*The Possibility of an Island* may be read as enacting a kind of rupture with *Particles* optimism about techno-utopian solutions to western civilisation's

⁷² Ibidem, 32.

⁷³ Michel Houellebecq, *Elementaire Deeltjes* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2008), 330.

⁷⁴ Betty, "F&#% autonomy," 34.

⁷⁵ Ruth, "Michel Houellebecq : la possibilité du bonheur," 158.

⁷⁶ Ibidem, 159.

seeming moral and spiritual collapse. While *Particles* ends, arguably, with an enthusiastic and even beatific portrayal of a post-human utopia, *Possibility's* clone protagonist Daniel²⁵ renounces Elohimism at the novel's end, thus suggesting a decline in the utopian optimism that animated the previous novel.⁷⁷ More recent novels like *Submission* and *The Map and the Territory* even emphasize completely different values. Betty describes a return of the 'traditional social order'; a new 'aristocracy' is installed in *The map and the Territory*, a group of people living in the countryside of France who value 'family, land and church'.⁷⁸ *Submission* takes a step further by portraying the instalment of a religious government (Islamic) in the predominantly secular French nation. This is not necessarily a critique of Islam according to Betty, on the contrary: '*Submission* is [...] a withering appraisal of the state of late-Enlightenment culture.'⁷⁹ The culture of progress based on freedom and individuality. According to Betty, the Comtean solution of an utopia shaped through science seems to be something of the past in Houellebecq's novels; the positive side of traditional values have been embraced in his recent works. Is this true for *Serotonin*? The second part of this chapter will prove otherwise.

Traces of Comte in *Serotonin*: The Religion of Humanity

The French society in *Serotonin* does not consist of cloned humans, nor is there any trace of an utopia. When we try to find traces of Comtean happiness, we should focus on the aspects of kindness and religion. First of all, why is religion of such importance from a Comden perspective? Martin de Haan answers this question: 'Het is het oude idee van Auguste Comte, Houellebecq's andere grote held: om een samenleving bijeen te houden is er een religie nodig (die hij dus zelf maar probeerde te stichten).'⁸⁰ Comte developed a religious project named the Religion of Humanity in his *Système de politique positive*. The Religion of Humanity worships mankind and functions as an all-encompassing social institution. This religious project was not only meant to take root in France and the western nations, but should spread across the world. The Religion of Humanity aims at strengthening altruistic instincts over egoistic ones. Humans have seven lower (egoistic) instincts: 'self-preservation,

⁷⁷ Betty, "F&#% autonomy," 32.

⁷⁸ Ibidem, 36.

⁷⁹ Ibidem, 37.

⁸⁰ Martin de Haan, *Aan de rand van de wereld: Michel Houellebecq* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2019), Chap.3, p.31.

sexual and maternal impulses, the urge to destroy, the urge to construct, the thirst for power and the thirst for esteem.⁸¹ The altruistic instincts are the three species of love: 'attachment, veneration and *bienveillance* or kindness. *Bienveillance* is the highest and purest, but its spontaneous impulse is exceedingly weak.'⁸² According to Comte, persons can strengthen their altruistic instincts through exercise, for example, 'by festivals, ceremonies and prayers.'⁸³ Religion in general helps achieving a dominance of the altruistic instincts over egoistic ones, by imagining fictive beings (gods) whom are endowed with the highest instincts; people can communicate with these beings and even form an emotional bond.⁸⁴ In Comte's Religion of Humanity the fictive being is humanity itself: thus, humanity as Great Being.

There are three features that shape the Great Being: the Great Being is an integral whole, the Great Being is temporal and women play a pivotal role in the movement toward the good.⁸⁵ The first of these features, humanity as an integral whole, means the following: 'those are members of the Great Being who participate in it, who execute its functions and who serve it in whatever way.'⁸⁶ People who do not actively serve humanity are not incorporated in the Great Being. Animals that have a cooperative relationship with humans can also be included in the Great Being. The second feature, the temporal aspect, means that the Great Being undergoes continuous metamorphosis. The members should love humans from both the present as past generations; a culture of memorializing those who are worthy. Thirdly, 'the most important duty of woman is to form and perfect man [...] the linchpin of positive morality, then, is the stable union of man and woman. It is this that, both domestically and society-wide, enables head and heart to be harmoniously combined, making of positivist marriage the nucleus and prototype of the highest level of social harmony.'⁸⁷

What aspects of this Religion of Humanity can be recognized in *Serotonin*? Labrouste indicates twice that he has achieved the ultimate moment of happiness in his life. The first

⁸¹ Michel Bourdeau, Mary Pickering, Warren Schmaus, *Love, Order & Progress. The Science, Philosophy & Politics of Auguste Comte* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018), 222.

⁸² Ibidem 222.

⁸³ Ibidem 223.

⁸⁴ Ibidem 224.

⁸⁵ Ibidem, 213.

⁸⁶ Ibidem 227.

⁸⁷ Ibidem, 232.

time is during a train ride with his lover Kate, using the following words: 'Ik was nog nooit van mijn leven zo gelukkig geweest en waarschijnlijk had mijn leven daar moeten ophouden'.⁸⁸ We obtain little information about Kate, she is highly intelligent and wants to study medicine after her short career as a business lawyer. Eventually, Labrouste abandons her for another woman; a fact Labrouste deeply regrets. The second time Labrouste indicates a peak of happiness, is during his relationship with Camille, using the following words: 'Ik was gelukkig, nog nooit was ik zo gelukkig geweest, en ik zou ook nooit meer zo gelukkig worden.'⁸⁹ Thus, Labrouste finds the highest peaks of happiness during his life, in loving relationships with women. According to Comte, women empower men by drawing them up, away from their engrained egoism and animality.⁹⁰ In line with Comte's way of thinking, Labrouste seems rather lost when being without a woman. As mentioned earlier in the chapter about Schopenhauer, love is part of the sensual pleasures, while the highest form of pleasure (according to Schopenhauer) is the pleasure of the mind. The pleasure of the mind can be achieved through selfless observation and finally ascetism. Labrouste does not experience any pleasures of the mind, literally rejecting the notion of Schopenhauerian happiness by using the following words: 'Ik heb het geluk gekend, ik weet wat het is, ik kan er deskundig over praten en weet ook hoe het eindigt, en wat er gewoonlijk op volgt [...] het enige was dat ik alleen was, letterlijk alleen, en dat ik geen enkel genot aan mijn eenzaamheid of aan de vrije werking van mijn geest ontleende, ik had behoefte aan liefde'.⁹¹

A stalemate between Comtean and Schopenhauerian happiness is taking place in *Serotonin*. Instead of embracing the Schopenhauerian ideals (a lack of desires and experiencing pleasure from the mind), Labrouste only recognizes happiness in the union between man and woman. He even argues that the loving bond between man and woman is the only form of human bonding or community left in modern society. The ideal of close communities as during the prehistoric hunter-gatherer period, have been made impossible through urbanization: 'Het klopt dat de weinig appetijtelijke voorouders van de mensheid in clans van enkele tientallen individuen leefden, en dat die formule zowel bij de jagersverzamelaars als bij de eerste agrarische volksstammen lange tijd had standgehouden [...] Maar de tijd had sindsdien niet stilgestaan, de stad was uitgevonden met haar logische

⁸⁸ Houellebecq, *Serotonine*, 84.

⁸⁹ Ibidem, 148.

⁹⁰ Bourdeau, Pickering, Schmaus, *Love, Order & Progress*, 232.

⁹¹ Houellebecq, *Serotonine*, 137.

uitvloeisel, de eenzaamheid, waarvoor alleen een gedeeld leven een echt alternatief kon bieden, we zouden nooit meer terugkeren naar het stadium van de clan.'⁹²

The quality of Labrouste's life increases during his relationship with Camille. Using his own words: Camille behaves in a 'pre-feminist' way.⁹³ Camille takes care of the household in multiple ways: by arranging new furniture and instead of doing groceries at the regular supermarket, the couple shops at local grocers; more specially, Camille is doing grocers while Labrouste drinks beer. He even says that a man does not know how to live without a woman, while Camille possesses the art of living. In the Religion of Humanity a strict sexual division of labour is encouraged: 'Women tend to the household, leaving wholly to men the world of work, money and public life, whose materialism and competitive striving would otherwise degrade and corrupt them.'⁹⁴ Such a degrading moment of public life takes places during a work visit of Camille. She is studying veterinary medicine, and gets heavily upset after visiting a free-range poultry farm. She panics after seeing the living circumstance of the animals. According to Labrouste, public life intruded in their relationship. Labrouste tries to protect Camille from bad influences through withholding information about other farms where animals live under degrading circumstances. The mental state of Camille is influencing Labrouste: 'Camille had echt een flinke klap gekregen, het was nog een veel te klein meisje om een intensieve pluimveehouderij te bezoeken [...] ikzelf voelde me uitgeput [...] ik voelde me echt bijzonder krachteloos, ik was mild en gelukkig.'⁹⁵ Concluding, Camille's character is fragile and not capable of dealing with the harsh realities of public life, while she does have a specific talent of arranging the household and increasing the quality of life. When Labrouste tries to shield her away from the outside world, he experiences a form of happiness. It could be argued that the relationship between Camille and Labrouste is a very traditional one; a relationship in line with the Religion of Humanity.

We have recognized forms of kindness within relationships. However, Comte strived to spread kindness throughout society by creating a religious community. What is the state of kindness in the French society as portrayed in *Serotonin* and do people feel part of a community? The answer is straightforward: kindness is entirely absent in *Serotonin*, while kindness is the highest altruistic instinct in the Religion of Humanity. Labrouste describes the

⁹² Ibidem, 272.

⁹³ Ibidem, 147.

⁹⁴ Bourdeau, Pickering, Schmaus, *Love, Order & Progress*, 232.

⁹⁵ Houellebecq, *Serotonine*, 146.

attitude of youngsters in the following way: 'de sfeer van deze generatie was anders [...] ze waren serieus, werkten hard, hechtten veel gewicht aan hun studieresultaten, alsof ze al wisten dat ze in de buitenwereld niets cadeau zouden krijgen.'⁹⁶ Is the French society dominated by egoistic instincts? The absence of kindness is the opposite of what the Religion of Humanity is striving for. On the contrary, the Religion of Humanity aims at increasing harmony and the love for others in a systematic manner, by creating a religious community. Labrouste thinks that higher altruistic instincts can only be ventilated in the safety of a relationship: 'De buitenwereld was hard, meedogenloos voor de zwakkeren en kwam zijn beloften bijna nooit na; de liefde was het enige waar je misschien nog op kon vertrouwen.'⁹⁷ Unfortunately for Labrouste, marriage as the highest confirmation of love has become impossible: 'Het echtelijk geluk van mijn ouders had ik diep van binnen altijd als onbereikbaar ervaren [...] omdat dat echtelijk model voor mijn gevoel in zekere zin was vernietigd'.⁹⁸ The Comtean ideal of an alleviating bond between a man and woman is described by Labrouste as an impossible ideal.

Concluding, for Labrouste Schopenhauerian happiness has become impossible through the use of anti-depressants. A Comtean sense of happiness on the other hand, by striving for the highest altruistic instincts, has become impossible either. Society does not aim for kindness and love in a Comtean systematic way, it is everyone for themselves. Marriage as the last stronghold of altruistic instincts, seems to be out of reach.

⁹⁶ Houellebecq, *Serotonine*, 154.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*, 155.

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, 165.

Chapter 4

Consequences of the narrative genre on the perception of happiness

Vivasvan Soni investigated the consequences of narrative genres on happiness. The choice between a trial and a tragic narrative has great implications on how happiness is perceived. In the tragic narrative the life of the protagonist ends in catastrophe and in the trial narrative the protagonist 'is subjected to a series of tests, ordeals, or temptations,'⁹⁹ the protagonist learns from the experienced hardships. A question whether the life of the protagonist is happy, is answered at the end of the protagonist's life in the tragic narrative. In the trial narrative on the other hand, a state of happiness may be reached after a difficult moment of trial or test. This chapter will first of all figure out whether *Serotonin* is a tragic or trial narrative, secondly what are the effects of the narrative genre on a question of happiness?

The first difference between a trial and tragic narrative is the judgement of happiness. Soni states the following about the judgement of happiness in a tragic narrative: 'In a tragic narrative, the question of happiness is always relevant, but the judgement of happiness must wait until the end of a life.'¹⁰⁰ In the trial narrative on the other hand, the question of happiness is deferred until the end of the trials. Furthermore: 'Unlike the tragic narrative, trial narratives desire pure states of both happiness and suffering.'¹⁰¹ Now, the following moment in the novel could pass on for a trial: the moment after Labrouste left Yuzu and is confronted with his loneliness. He is tested whether he is able of being content on his own. The only times he felt happiness is during his relationships; when he is alone, he desires loving companionship. As mentioned earlier in the chapter about Schopenhauer, Labrouste starts to doubt his state of non-desire. Doubt causes him to seek counsel from a psychiatrist, ending up with a recipe for anti-depressants. Was this moment of loneliness a trial as described by Soni? Soni argues that a trial is a pure moment: 'There is no glimpse of happiness in the time of trials and adversities just as there is no trace of suffering in the time of happiness.'¹⁰² Happiness seems to be absent during the period after Labrouste left Yuzu.

⁹⁹ Vivasvan Soni, "Trials and Tragedies: The Literature of Unhappiness (A Model for Reading Narratives of Suffering)," *Comparative Literature* 59, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 121.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*, 127.

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*, 127.

¹⁰² *Ibidem*, 127.

He does not experience any joy and suffers from loneliness. Furthermore, he does not necessarily regard himself as happy nor is he suffering; he experiences a complete calmness. Schopenhauer would be delighted with Labrouste's state of mind: experiencing no desire and wishing to get rid of his body.

If the mentioned period is actually a trial, the trial ends when Labrouste starts using Captorix; from this point onwards he starts to dig in his past. There is one important issue: when he starts using Captorix, his state of mind does not improve towards a state of happiness. On the contrary, the only moments of happiness lie in the past. Soni argues that when a trial and the period of suffering ends, a pure state of happiness should begin. This is clearly not the case, a period of pure happiness did not begin after using anti-depressants. For this reason, the described duration of time cannot be regarded as a trial. There are no separate moments of happiness and suffering in the novel. As a matter of fact, Labrouste does not know himself whether he is happy or miserable. Instead, the question of happiness is relevant throughout the whole novel. Suffering contaminates every aspect of the protagonist's life, while the possibility of reaching a state of happiness remains open. The latter is a feature of the tragic narrative according to Soni.

Thus, a tragic narrative structure implies a judgement of happiness at the end of the narrative. At the end of *Serotonin*, Labrouste has retreated in the outskirts of Paris, preparing himself to commit suicide. His attempts of establishing a lasting relationship have failed, he has turned completely apathetic. Yet, we do not witness the actual deed of suicide. Is the reader supposed to fill in for himself whether Labrouste made an end to his life? Perhaps Houellebecq wants us to figure out by ourselves if suicide will actually take place. On the other hand, since the narrative is told in the first person (from the perspective of Labrouste), he would be unable to relate his own death. Leaving out the moment of suicide seems logic with this knowledge. Returning towards the judgement of happiness, the question whether Labrouste has lived a happy life is rather clear. He has made mistakes which led him to a state of alienation. The moments of happiness during his relationships were ruined because life presented unlimited options and he cheated. If Labrouste had learned from his mistakes, he could have altered his behaviour. In a trial narrative, the protagonist learns lessons from his hardships and might grow because of the trials. Since *Serotonin* is a tragic narrative, beneficial growth through hardships is unlikely. Labrouste did

not change, instead he chooses a new relationship with Yuzu that ultimately fails, since attraction was purely based on sexual attraction and not on kindness or love.

A symbolic event that depicts a state of lovelessness in the novel, is the encounter with a paedophile. Labrouste is visiting his friend Aymeric, staying in one of the guesthouses on his land. A German man is the only other guest and he is regularly visited by a young girl. On the laptop of the German man, Labrouste finds sexual recordings (again fellatio) of the young girl. In *De Koude revolutie* the following statement by Houellebecq about paedophilia is made: 'De pedofiel lijkt me de ideale zondebok van een samenleving die de begeerte op georganiseerde wijze opzweept zonder de middelen aan te dragen om die te bevredigen.'¹⁰³ The paedophile is used as the symbolic embodiment of a society incapable of providing sexual needs and intimacy; the same problem that contaminates the life of Labrouste. Perhaps this is the reason why he does not report the event to the police: he and the paedophile undergo the same problems. Instead of reporting the paedophile, he stays rather passive and wakes up calmly the morning after their moment of confrontation: 'Op de ochtend van de 31ste stond ik met een bijna vredig humeur op en liet een serene blik over het bungalowlandschap gaan.' In *De Koude revolutie* Houellebecq makes the following comment about paedophilia and happiness: 'Door de ontmoeting van die twee, de pedofiel en het kind (de een het gelukkigste wezen van de wereld, omdat het de begeerte nog niet kent; de ander het ongelukkigste wezen van de wereld, omdat hij de begeerte kent maar de verzadiging niet kan bereiken), zijn de voorwaarden aanwezig voor een volmaakt melodrama.'¹⁰⁴ The moment of confrontation with the paedophile in *Serotonin* could be understood from this perspective. Labrouste and the paedophile are both unable to saturate their desires.

Another feature that distinguishes the trial from the tragic narrative is the so called moral dilemma. With moral dilemma Soni means the following: the protagonist makes moral decisions during the narrative, these decisions give direction to its life. Moral dilemmas in the tragic narrative are formed by the world one lives in: 'In tragic narratives, moral dilemmas are located in the world itself. They are a constitutive feature of the material, social and cultural nexus inhabited by the protagonist.'¹⁰⁵ Thus, the moral dilemma of the

¹⁰³ Michel Houellebecq, *De Koude revolutie, confrontaties en bespiegelingen* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2004), 236.

¹⁰⁴ Ibidem, 237.

¹⁰⁵ Soni, "Trials and Tragedies," 128.

protagonist is dependent on the outside world; this means that every choice of the protagonist will eventually lead to catastrophe, suffering is inescapable, since suffering is caused by the world or society. Suffering in the trial narrative on the other hand is dependent on the psyche of the protagonist. The protagonist has the possibility to choose a direction, there is a right and wrong answer which is revealed during the moment of trial. Soni states the following about suffering in the trial narrative: 'Because the protagonist's response is calibrated against a standard - a standard the protagonist's life may come to exemplify upon successful negotiation of the test - the trials of the protagonist are viewed as temptations rather than irresolvable aporias. The difficulty attending moral situations is thus not a constitutive feature of the world so much as it is of the psyche.'¹⁰⁶ Is the suffering of the protagonist in *Serotonin* caused by the outside world or the by the psyche of Labrouste? Multiple accusations towards the existing culture are made, in both direct and indirect ways. As mentioned earlier in the subparagraph about the will of Aymeric, the misfortune of him and Labrouste is caused by culture, namely a culture of decadent instant pleasures and neoliberalism. Even though Labrouste longs for a relationship and glorifies marriage, and Aymeric's farm suffers from neoliberal policy, the misfortunes of both men are caused by the outside world. Perhaps Labrouste would not have cheated if it was not for the culture of instant pleasures. The same reasoning is applicable on the use of anti-depressants. The unprofessional behaviour of the psychiatrist, which raises questions towards the ease of prescribing anti-depressants and the subjectivity of describing a healthy state of mind, leads to an introduction with Captorix. Whatever choice Labrouste makes, he gets confronted with the culture of instant pleasures and a lack of love. The novel presents his fate as a product of his environment; again, learning after his hardships is absent.

The third feature that distinguishes the trial from the tragic narrative, according to Soni, is the reader response. Readers are supposed to respond in a different way to the trial or tragic narrative. The tragic narrative should create a feeling of pity for the protagonist. Moreover, the reader becomes aware of the sufferings of others through pity. The trial narrative solicits a different response: 'Instead of sympathy, trial narratives solicit a relation of empathy or identification with the protagonist.'¹⁰⁷ The reader should imagine himself going through the same trial as the protagonist, thereby sharing the triumphs of

¹⁰⁶ Ibidem, 129.

¹⁰⁷ Ibidem, 131

withstanding the trial and attaining virtue. Soni summarizes the difference in the following way: 'At stake here is the difference between feeling for the protagonist (tragedy) and feeling with the protagonist (trial).'¹⁰⁸ The previous paragraphs signalled the lack of lessons learned by Labrouste: he did not alter his behaviour. Still, Labrouste is not a bad man. He knows he made mistakes and regrets the missteps of the past, while he cannot change because his mistakes are caused by the culture of the outside world. As a reader we feel sympathy for this protagonist, we understand why he made his missteps. Furthermore, he longs for something noble: the stable unity of man and woman and the victory of love. The trial narrative solicits for a response of identification. The apathic characteristics of Labrouste make it hard to identify with him, the reader does not want to be Labrouste, instead pitying him from a distance.

In the introduction of this thesis, the term dark narrative was introduced. This chapter has demonstrated that *Serotonin* is also a *tragic* dark narrative. What is a tragic dark narrative able to tell the reader about human flourishing and happiness? 'The negative emotions aroused by tragic and/or negative works can also stimulate positive affect.'¹⁰⁹ The presence of negative emotions in a tragedy can inspire the reader to act on behalf of the virtue of compassion. Reading literature that contains negative emotions could inspire the reader to reflect on the difficult situations: 'If we read of a character who chooses wrongly or acts reprehensibly or unjustly and then suffers for it, our own sense of morality and justice is strengthened.'¹¹⁰ The protagonist in *Serotonin* makes the wrong choices and continuously suffers for it. All the mentioned acts of Labrouste lead to a state of alienation and suffering, while he keeps desiring the amount of love he once experienced. This desire is so strong that it suffocates him, he wants to feel the happiness from the past, but it is out of reach.

¹⁰⁸ Ibidem, 131.

¹⁰⁹ Pawelski and Moores, *The Eudaimonic Turn*, 24.

¹¹⁰ Ibidem, 24.

Conclusion

In what ways do ideas on happiness manifest themselves in Michel Houellebecq's novel *Serotonin*? *Serotonin* can be read as an exploration of Comtean and Schopenhauerian ideas on harmony and human flourishing in the twenty first century. Protagonist Labrouste is the embodiment of an Schopenhauerian inner battle that is necessary in order to achieve a state of ascetism. A state of ascetism equals a state of non-desire; obtaining this state of mind can end the amount of suffering underneath the will to live. The moment Labrouste experiences a state of non-desire, he starts to doubt whether his lack of desires is healthy. His psychiatrist is clearly not a supporter of Schopenhauer. A lack of desire should be treated with medication, with anti-depressants. By using anti-depressants, Labrouste is unable to embrace his suffering, he is unable to face the pains caused by the will to live. The anti-depressants only numb the pain down to a bearable level, and do not solve the problem at the root cause. Suicide is a manifestation of desiring too much in a Schopenhauerian sense; it is the fate of both Aymeric and Labrouste. Both men have a lot of things in common: they long for a woman in their lives; they find it impossible to embrace their suffering, which leads to a choice of suicide; they are negatively impacted by the existing culture; they are connected through their mutual passion for agriculture; and both characters disagree with the existing agricultural policy. Aymeric who descends from the aristocracy, desires to lead a traditional life by running his farm in a traditional way, just as Labrouste experienced a peak of happiness during his 'traditional' relationship with the pre-feminist Camille.

The novel praises certain ideas about the role of women through the relationship with Camille; ideas which are based on Comte's Religion of Humanity. The Religion of Humanity aims at increasing altruistic instincts above egoistic ones through a religious community. Women play a pivotal role in this religious community since they carry the ability to alleviate men. Labrouste feels alleviated during his relationship with Camille, she gives his life direction. She is too sensitive to pursue a career and should be shielded from public life, but she arranges the household perfectly. Labrouste breaks this peak of happiness by cheating on Camille, just like he cheated on Kate; the culture of unlimited options is to blame. Eventually he chooses to start a relationship with the decadent Yuzu, here attraction is based just on sexual attraction. However, the amount of love he experienced during his relationships with Camille and Kate seems to be out of reach. He

longs for the same amount of happiness as he experienced during love. A stalemate between Comtean and Schopenhauerian ideas on human flourishing becomes visible through his longing. Schopenhauer would eradicate all desires to end the process of suffering, while Comte regards the loving bond between man and woman necessary to reach the higher altruistic instincts. Labrouste chooses to desire, the Schopenhauerian state of non-desire does not create the same level of human flourishing, as he experienced during love.

Freudian elements which emphasize the impossibility of love can also be recognized in the novel. The excessive presence of food, a ban on smoking, and the overrepresentation of a certain form of sexual conduct, all address a return to the oral phase which is auto-erotic and therefore lacks loving emotions between persons. This is not only the case for Labrouste, the novel portrays many members of a French society who suffer from a lack of love. A culture of unlimited options, the devaluation of marriage, and the high amount of competition between persons, reduce the amount of kindness in society, while kindness or *bienveillance* is the highest and purest impulse according to Comte. Moreover, love and family life are part of the sensual pleasures which can lead to happiness. Pleasures of the mind, which can be achieved through selfless observation are only reserved for a selected few according to Schopenhauer. Houellebecq argues that the sensual pleasures have become harder to experience through the existing culture, affecting the happiness of the majority of people.

Finally, if *Serotonin* may be regarded as a dark tragic narrative, does that mean the novel portrays little about happiness? On the contrary, through the failings of Labrouste we may become aware of the challenges life in the 21st century has to offer. By taking notes from his mistakes, the reader could possibly become a kinder person; perhaps this was not the first intention of Houellebecq, but Auguste Comte would probably be pleased with this thought.

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