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Michel Houellebecq and the dialectic between modernity and tradition: Soumission as a Guenonian novel

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Michel Houellebecq and the dialectic between modernity and tradition

Soumission as a Guenonian novel



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Photograph: Michel Houellebecq, "French Bashing", 2017.

Met dank aan Dr. Schulte Nordholt voor haar kritische begeleiding, aan mijn familie, vrienden en aan mijn vriendin.

Pablo Kattenberg

Leiden, 21 december 2021

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“I accelerate history, but no, I can’t say that the book [*Soumission* (2015)] is a provocation—if that means saying things I consider fundamentally untrue just to get on people’s nerves. I condense an evolution that is, in my opinion, realistic.” (Houellebecq in Bourmeau)

Comment, en effet, ne pas adhérer à l’idée de la décadence de l’Europe ? (Houellebecq *Soumission* 126)

Introduction

The oeuvre of French author Michel Houellebecq consists of many novels, poems, essays and other works, published between 1994 and the present. He is widely read in France, the rest of Europe and throughout the world. During his career as an author, Houellebecq has gained an infamous status in France and beyond. He has been criticized as an Islamophobe, a misogynist and as a misanthrope in general. His 2015 novel *Soumission* sparked controversy. Its publication coincided with the assault on the Charlie Hebdo offices, and this event left many readers with a sense that *Soumission* was an Islam-critical or even ‘Islamophobic’ novel. At the time, it was the perception of the audience that *Soumission* novelized the idea of a *grand remplacement*. The Charlie Hebdo massacre thus fundamentally affected the public reception of the novel. As a response to the upheaval, the then Prime Minister Manuel Valls stated that “La France, ce n’est pas la soumission, la France, ce n’est pas Michel Houellebecq. La France, ce n’est pas l’intolérance, la haine, la peur” (Tronche in Williams & Sweeney *Introduction 2*).

Like any other Houellebecq novel, the story represents a dislikable, cynical and depressed male protagonist. In the case of *Soumission*, the protagonist, François, is a university professor who is specialized in the work of J. K. Huysmans. The narrative of the novel roughly recounts the months preceding and following the French presidential elections of the year 2022. In Houellebecq’s fiction, the election is won by a moderately Islamic party, whose representatives are able to form an effective government with a leftist coalition. As their policies begin to take effect, François witnesses these events from of a vaguely nostalgic and indifferent disposition. François is a damaged individual, who is unable to integrate these changes into his own life. Lethargically, he attempts to submit himself to Catholicism, but fails to commit to the idea. At the end of the novel, he is convinced by the new university dean to convert to Islam.

When viewed from a bird-eye perspective, Houellebecq’s novels tell grand narratives that portray an abrupt or gradual decline of Western civilization. Each of his novels finds their own particular way to express this declinism. *Les Particules Élémentaires* (1998), for example, on the

narratological level of the *syuzhet*, is a story about two half-brothers and their personal demise. On the narratological level of the fabula however, the reader finds that the story of Bruno and Michel is merely a frame-tale that is embedded in a story that takes place after the main events of the novel. The main story recounts retroactively how human civilization has been replaced by genetically engineered humanoids. These beings narrate a frame-tale of humanity's decline through the story of Bruno and Michel. Houellebecq's style is characterized by this employment of literary tropes such as frame devices, but also by his use of narratives with extended durations; the narratological play with the hierarchy between fabula and *syuzhet*; his apparent Schopenhauerian declinism and misanthropy; the contemporary setting of his novels in modern Europe; how his novels border the essayistic style, high literature and low literature; his intellectual engagement with ideas such as Utopianism or Enlightenment notions vis-à-vis modern society; they all explain his great success and the extensive academic criticism in Francophone and Anglophone literary studies.

Accordingly, the popularity of Houellebecq's novels has spawned a wide-ranging discourse of varying interpretations. Many of them rally around the idea that, in order to understand Houellebecq's mimesis, i.e. the relation between his fiction and its representation of modern Europe, one must take into account that it is constituted by a decisive political element. In other words, many interpretations start with the intuition that Houellebecq is essentially a politically oriented author, and that his novels convey a strongly encrypted political ordeal with regard to European society. Contrarily, other voices in this debate suggest that a political reading of Houellebecq's novels would be a fruitless exercise that defies the conventions of literary interpretation.

Arguably, like many of Houellebecq's other novels, *Soumission* represents another narrative of civilizational decline. In the present, with the actual French elections of the year 2022 closing in, the novel continues to be relevant and to be read. Revisiting it in these circumstances, the reader is confronted with the contrast between novel and reality. The French far right holds a large share of the electorate in the current polls (December 2021), and the campaign of the 2022 French elections has been characterized by the political rise of the right-wing journalist Éric Zemmour. Evidently, *Soumission* did not predict the 2022 elections, life did not imitate art, rather, *Soumission* showed us a conflicting imitation of it.

This context reinvigorates familiar questions surrounding *Soumission* and Houellebecq's work in general: is *Soumission* a reactionary imagination of a *grand remplacement*, or is it an apparently contradictory embrace of Islamic values? In general, what is Houellebecq's identity as an author? Is he a decadent who comments upon society from within a liminal space of seclusion? Is he a reactionary, a fierce anti-capitalist, or a conservative antimodern? Is his oeuvre inherently political? Are we even allowed to pose that question?

In my opinion, an overlooked element of *Soumission*, which I will elaborate on in this thesis, could shine new light on these questions, namely that the concept of tradition as it is to be found in Houellebecq's novels can be instrumentalized to identify these questions surrounding his authorship. What is tradition, and how does it appear in Houellebecq's novels, from his earlier work, to his later work? How significant is the concept of tradition throughout his work? To answer this question, I will offer in this thesis an interpretation of *Soumission* in which the so-called 'Guénonian' elements of the novel will be analyzed. René Guénon, for those unfamiliar with his person, is a 20th century French Indologist and esotericist who has written works on Hindu civilization. However, behind the veil of academic pretension Guénon is known to be an idiosyncratic kind of reactionary thinker, and has gained a modern audience amongst the far right. Guénon's work combines a reflection on the virtues of 'Eastern' civilization, which Guénon deems to be spiritually and ideologically pure, with a deep-rooted criticism of Western civilization. In *Soumission*, Guénon appears, however marginally, as a figure with an important contribution to the narrative. The new university dean, Robert Rediger, who re-organizes the Sorbonne as a religiously oriented institution, is deeply inspired by Guénon's work. Later on, Rediger appears to function as an important member of Ben-Abbes, the new president, and his government. At the end of the novel, it is Rediger who convinces François to convert to Islam. What is Guénon doing in a novel of a widely read French author? New information about the reactionary nature of Guénon's work, motivates this question. In Houellebecq's 2010 novel, *La Carte et le territoire* (2010), Guénon is also mentioned. The appearance of Guénon in Houellebecq's work is not just an anomaly, Houellebecq must be familiar with him and his work in general terms. In this thesis, I will investigate the relation between Guénon's theory and the narrative of *Soumission*: how does the story integrate elements of Guénon's traditionalist thinking? Is it possible to construct a

political interpretation of *Soumission* based on this Guénonian reading?

In my comparative analysis I foreground one particular element that is present in Houellebecq's 2010 and 2015 novels *La Carte et le territoire* and *Soumission*. I question how the concept of tradition is represented in these novels, especially in *Soumission*. Tradition in my reading signifies the word as it can be found in the theoretical work of René Guénon. What does tradition mean in *Soumission*, and can *Soumission* be read as a Guénonian novel? Alternatively, why does *Soumission* resist such a reading, and how could the traditionalist elements of the novel be interpreted otherwise? What incentive will this comparative analysis add to the discussion of Houellebecq as a conservative or even reactionary author?

On the dialectic between tradition and modernity

To support my analysis of *Soumission*, I will also suggest that an interpretation of Houellebecq's earlier novels could help to contextualize the place of Guénon in Houellebecq's work. Particularly, I will research how Houellebecq's other novels represent a dynamic between reaction and progression. By reading how Houellebecq has responded in his novels to neoliberal capitalism and by exploring his position on Enlightenment values, I will construct a theoretical basis on which to make this Guénonian reading palpable. By reading Houellebecq's novel *Soumission* within the theoretical framework of Guénon, I attempt to explore, and extend upon, the dialectic between modernity and tradition that is already thematically present in Houellebecq's oeuvre.

On a methodological note, a comparative method should take into account the formal differences between theory and novel. When I question if *Soumission* can be read as a Guénonian novel, I intend to question how Houellebecq's novels, as literature, and not as a work of cultural philosophy or political polemic, can be submitted to comparative research of their representation of Guénon's concept of tradition.

Synopses

Here I offer a plot summary of the three novels I will use most. *Les Particules Élémentaires* (1998) is a tale about two half-brothers, narrated from the perspective of a genetically manipulated

human life form commenting on the peculiarities of human existence. The brothers, Bruno and Michel, are separated early on in their lives. Michel enjoys a protected childhood in the care of his grandmother, but Bruno's childhood is difficult because of his relationship with his mother. Bruno is now a literature teacher at a secondary school in a provincial city. When he stays at the *Lieu du Changement*, a hippie resort with an emphasis on free love and intimacy, Bruno meets Christine. Bruno is continuously haunted by the traumatic events of his childhood and has a problematic affection for his pupils. His relationship with Christine has seemed to lift his existential suffering. His *mal de vivre* reaffirms itself when Christine commits suicide. Michel on the other hand, has led a life of intellectual production in the field of biology. He was separated from his childhood girlfriend Annabelle, but they reunite later in his life. Like with Bruno, Michel's personal life is reinvigorated by life and the prospect of a communal life with his partner, until Annabelle is diagnosed with cancer and dies. Bruno ponders suicide to deal with his troubles, whilst Michel develops a scientific theory that dramatically alters research in genetic modifications. After 2029 a new race of genetically engineered humans that live without pain or pleasure comes into being and replaces humanity.

In *La Carte et le territoire* (2010), protagonist Jed Martin becomes a successful photographer when he starts to photograph Michelin maps. His artistic development leads to several other successful artistic achievements. He meets Olga, a Russian employee of Michelin, who ends their love affair to return to her home country. Jed visits French author Michel Houellebecq to paint his portrait in exchange for a lecture at his exhibition. In the second part of the novel, a Parisian detective investigates the murder of Michel Houellebecq, who was brutally murdered and robbed of his portrait by Jed Martin. In the third part of the novel Jed leaves his seclusion in the French countryside and discovers that during his absence, the French economy has restructured itself around an agrarian backbone of de-urbanized youths with sympathy for traditional values and family.

The plot of *Soumission* imagines the democratic victory of president Mohammed Ben-Abbes in the 2022 French elections. Protagonist François is a lecturer at the Sorbonne and has written a widely acclaimed dissertation on the work of J. K. Huysmans. His life until his position at the Sorbonne has been solitary. As a professor he frequently dates his students. He is enamored by his Jewish girlfriend. The French national elections take place and after a violent and chaotic interlude that signifies the change

of government, during which the protagonist flees Paris, order is restored and the new Islamic-inspired policies begin to affect French life. During his absence from Paris, the protagonist visits a monastery that Huysmans has written about and visited. He leaves feeling uninspired and returns to Paris. Despite loss of his position at the Sorbonne, which is now a private Islamic university funded by Arabic oil money, the new dean of the university, Robert Rediger, offers François a new position at the university. François contemplates the offer and the compelling arguments that Rediger makes. The novel ends with a phantasmagoric conversion to Islam in which François submits to the comforts of religion.

Chapter outline

In the first chapter, I will describe a theoretical framework to explain the concept of *tradition* as understood in the thought of René Guénon. I will introduce the discourse of tradition that is to be found in his works, mainly in *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu doctrines* (1921) and *The Crisis of the Modern World* (1921). To instrumentalize this term for a reading of a Houellebecq novel, I will set out to explain how tradition relates to other important keywords of Guénon's work. Finally, I will explain how Guénon's work can be interpreted as anti-modern, and how tradition can be understood as a reactionary normative concept.

In the second chapter, I will use the arguments of Houellebecq scholars Carole Sweeney and Louis Betty, to present a reading of how modernity is represented in Houellebecq's novels. Is Houellebecq, like Guénon, an anti-modern? Creating a dialogue between these authors will allow me to present a context of secondary literature in which to place my own reading of *Soumission*. I will present a reading of Sweeney's book *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair* (2013), which analysis Houellebecq's critique on neoliberal capitalism and how that critique is inherently part of Houellebecq's literature. Then, I will use the articles of scholar Louis Betty, who has written extensively about Houellebecq and the place of religion in his work, to illustrate how Houellebecq's early novel *Les Particules Élémentaires* contains an internal dialectic between Positivism and tradition. Betty's thesis that there is a "gradual exhaustion of utopian confidence" (Betty "Promise of Utopia" 98), which is based on a critique of Enlightenment heritage, to be detected in the progression of Houellebecq's novels will be researched, in order to relate Houellebecq's novel's further to Guénon's writings.

The third chapter will entail a close reading of *Soumission*. I will present a specific reading of what I call *narrative accelerations* that are typical to the narrative structure of Houellebecq's novels. I will make a comparative analysis between Guénon's notion of tradition and Houellebecq's novels. To what extent can we say Houellebecq's *Soumission* is a Guénonian novel, and to what extent is it seriously traditionalist?

Chapter 1: Approaching René Guénon's concept of tradition

“The despair [in my work] comes from saying good-bye to a civilization, however ancient. But in the end the Koran turns out to be much better than I thought, now that I've reread it” (Houellebecq in Bourmeau)

Introduction

This chapter will provide the reader with an interpretative reading of several key concepts of French scholar of religion and oriental cultures René Guénon. Specifically, it will critically explore the meaning of the term tradition and other closely related terms within Guénon's work. During my reading, I intend to limit a discussion of Guénon's work by questioning how the idea of tradition can be relevant to a reading of *Soumission*. To make sense of Guénon's idiosyncratic discourse however, I will need to explain some underlying notions of his work in detail.

Firstly, I will introduce my motivation for the comparison between Guénon and Houellebecq. Then, I will explore Guénon's key terms. In my review of Guénon's works *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* (1921) and *The Crisis of the Modern World* (1921) I will answer the question what tradition means within the scope of Guénon's work. Finally, I will question why this concept of tradition could contribute to a reading of Michel Houellebecq's representation of modernity in his novels.

Introducing Guénon

I will briefly introduce Guénon, before I will go into a more detailed analysis of his work. Guénon's writing, typified by a dense and wordy style, presents itself as an academic description of Hindu culture. Especially his main text, *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* (1921), takes as its object of study the cultures of a generalized 'East', divided into the near east, the middle east, and the far east. Although Guénon has written many essays next to this main work, his most influential ideas are already present within the *Introduction*. Other topics that Guénon engages with in his writings include cultural polemics and a polemic of Western religion. Although Guénon's work is focused on a description of 'Eastern' culture and texts, it discredits the idea of Western civilization altogether for lacking a thing called 'tradition'. The notion of tradition is a key concept in Guénon's oeuvre,

functioning as a means to articulate the timeless spiritual glory of the 'East'. Moreover, throughout his extensive work Guénon defines tradition as opposed to the idea of modernity. Not only is tradition the antithesis of modernity, tradition as an ideology (this idea I will return to later) is vulnerable to the fundamental concepts of modern thinking. I am already hinting towards the idea that, as an account of 'Hindu Doctrines, Guénon's writing is preoccupied with contrasting ancient culture to modern society. Tradition is important in Guénon's theoretical construction of a 'corrupted West' and a 'spiritual East'. The former is characterized as traditional, whereas the latter is supposed to be astray from traditional values that were once, before modernity, self-evident. Next to the notion of tradition, the idea of modernity is an important concept in Guénon's thought. Modernity, as it is to be found in the labyrinth of Guénon's terminology, is a period of time in which the values of tradition are absent.

The dialectic modernity of tradition

To clarify the relation between Houellebecq's literature and the idea of modernity for the reader, I will briefly present my understanding of the term modernity, to which I refer throughout this thesis. To designate modernity as a period of time, as I have done, one must understand the general dialectic between revolution and reaction that has characterized any discourse after the events of the French revolution. Modernity is a period of time precisely because the collection of ideas that underlie it have created a fundamental break with the existing ideological institutions of the pre-revolutionary period. The Enlightenment has created the philosophical basis for the idea of modernity. Reacting to absolute monarchism, a form of government in which sovereignty is personified by the monarch, the Enlightenment has formulated several important ideas that were meant to redistribute the balance of power that existed between the sovereign and the people. The most important of these underlying ideas can be described as follows: the primacy of reason over authority, the value of progress to improve the human condition, human autonomy from church and state and the separation of those two institutions, guaranteed by a secular and republican government.

To understand the relation between the idea of modernity and tradition, this new conception of the autonomous man, the individual at the center of their own world, is a vital one. According to traditional thought, it is not man's individuality, but their position within a community or other network

of contingent and historical relations that endows them with the foundations of a good and just life; not their ability to think freely, but the consolidation of their individual being within community and authority. This perceived historical relation between man and tradition is for traditional thinkers distorted by the ideas that were imbued by the Enlightenment into modern European polities. To distort the relation between man and tradition, in traditional thought, means to distort the processes that make life meaningful and worth living. Furthermore, the Enlightenment embraced a rejection of the intrinsic value of the institutions that, before, towered above the individual: religion, family, the monarch, the aristocracy, the patriarch. Because the autonomy of man is so central to the period of modernity, the freedom to think for themselves according to the principles of reason, and not to be subjected to exterior hierarchies of values and ideas, it is evident that tradition is bound to modernity in the form of a dialectic. As I understand it, this dialectic is a struggle between the two opposing ideas that it is either the nature of man to be free from others, or opposing that view, that he should be bound to higher principles outside of himself in order to flourish.¹

With regard to this dialectic, it can be said that the history of modern literature plays a pivotal role in its development. From the early modern period and onwards, literature has been the intellectual stage where the struggle of ideas has raged, offering a place to speak from for both adversaries and advocates of the values of the Enlightenment. When we jump to Houellebecq's literature, situated in the modern France of the 1990's, it is clear that his first novel *L'Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994), is already deeply embedded within this literary-historical dialectic between modernity and tradition, and this relationship will only deepen as his oeuvre progresses. The protagonist, whose name is not defined, works as an IT professional for a generic tech company that operates under stereotypical business philosophies that are designed to optimize the efficiency of its employees as well as the profit of the enterprise. The protagonist, although part of the social sphere of the workplace, is alienated by the people around him. He is sexually inactive outside of his own accord. He is especially preoccupied by his idea that the effects of the May '68 student riots have *extended the struggle* of class to the domain of sex,

¹ There exist many different of what 'modernity' is. The one employed here is based on the ideas of the classical thinkers of modernity, such as Max Weber, Karl Marx and Georg Simmel. Essentially, this theory approaches the idea of modernity as a time frame of 'modernization' that is characterized by a "growing rationalization" of society (Turner vii).

meaning that to him individuals who are perceived as unattractive, the lower sexual classes, are embroiled in a perpetual conflict where they combat to gain access to inaccessible sex. This may seem like a bizarre notion, but when understood as a general critique of how capitalism has affected private life, it is an original, yet equally dark and cynical, critique of modern life. By resisting the sentiments of the May revolution, Houellebecq already invokes the dialectic between reaction and revolution.²

The idea of modernity in the literary oeuvre of Michel Houellebecq is implicitly present as a historical phenomenon from which many modern vices have originated. From his first novel *L'Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994) to his most critically acclaimed novel *La Carte et le territoire* (2010), certain motives and theme's reoccur in his work, such as the relation between sex and capitalism; the effects of 'May '68' on French society; the secularization of Europe; the steady deconstruction of the nuclear family, and the (im)possibility of authentic human relationships in general. Houellebecq's protagonists share their disdain for modern France. In many of his novels there exists a capitalist society that celebrates hyper-individuality and excludes the socially disadvantaged and the sexually unappealing from climbing its hierarchies. Houellebecq's protagonists and most of his other important characters all fit within this caste of people that are excluded from a society that is devoid of authenticity.

Where Guénon agrees with the idea that civilization must bind human beings to exterior hierarchies in order for them to flourish, we could at least pose in advance that Houellebecq's novels question whether or not this might be true. This dialectic, as I will argue in the second chapter, is an important constant in his oeuvre. An idea that is approached from several different direction throughout his different novels. As I will argue in the second chapter, *Extension* can be read as a critique of neoliberal capitalism, whereas *Particules* creates a sort of fictional Comtean experiment to investigate whether or not there is an alternative to traditional religion.

How these different ideological or theoretical currents that are woven throughout Houellebecq's oeuvre can be aligned is rather problematic and confusing, as they often seem to contradict one another. It attributes to the rather polyphonic reception of Houellebecq's fiction in the academic sphere. This, I

² The notion of reaction set out in this paragraph is based on the introduction of Mark Lilla's *The Shipwrecked Mind: On Political Reaction* (2016), which provides a brief explanation of reactionary historiography and its implication in literary history.

think, is exemplified by Bruno Viard's article "Houellebecq du côté de Rousseau". In his article Viard questions "que dit cette œuvre? Que disons-nous, nous-mêmes, de ce que dit cette œuvre?" (127). Viard's article ambitiously announces to resolve the question of Houellebecq's ambiguous politics by declaring that his work is decidedly ambiguous: "est-il de gauche ou de droite?" (Viard 127). In Viard's opinion the politics of Houellebecq are simultaneously radically left, because of his critique on economic liberalism, and conservative, because of his critique on liberal sexuality and his nostalgia for the nuclear family (Viard 129).

The centrist conclusion that Viard arrives at, which poses that Houellebecq supposedly reveals a two-sided political intention, remains however unsatisfactory. This idea captures the status quo of the political research into Houellebecq's novels, as it concedes the possibility of viable political interpretation. One is left with unanswered questions regarding the nature of these conservative ideas. It is too simple to leave this discussion stranded ambiguously, especially because it fails to provide a motivation for academic research that investigates to what extent Houellebecq's novels are political.

A non-hermetic dialectic

In this thesis I maintain the idea that Houellebecq's prose in some way invokes the dialectic of the Enlightenment by representing complex narratives in which the idea of modernity and tradition are opposed. This is what I mean when I refer to the dialectic in my argument. Vital to my understanding of this dialectic is that throughout Houellebecq's oeuvre it does not present a synthesis that nullifies the conflict. It is difficult to state that Houellebecq's novelistic oeuvre at one point weighs more heavily towards a normative idea of tradition. In this sense the dialectic is endless, and arguably it is emblematic of Houellebecq's literary instrumentation. Ultimately this is why we consider Houellebecq's writings literature and not theory or political pamphlets. Still I think it is worthy of scholarly research to investigate this dialectic more closely, especially along with the theoretical work of Guénon. I focus on *Soumission* because of its plot; it narrates the events of the French 2022 elections, after which an Islamic party claims victory and forms a government, reinstalling different

traditional values and institutions into the heavily secularized French state and public sphere; raises the suggestion that tradition vanquishes modernity at the end of this dialectic.

Framing Guénon

Guénon's work, because of its object, is embedded within 19th century scientific traditions, which sought to understand colonial cultural traditions by systemizing their cultural objects. Also traceable is the affinity between Guénon's thinking and the conceptual framework of the German romantic tradition, which explored the semantics of concepts such as culture, civilization, nation and people and their proposed relation. Like the German romantics and the social/ethnographic scientific currents of the 19th and 20th century, Guénon's discursive methods center on *Verstehen* through the praxis of reading ancient (Hindu) literatures. In his many writings he underscores the importance between a civilization and the immaterial objects that belong to it, guised under the name of metaphysics. The unique premise of Guénon's (quasi-)scientific work is that it proposes to understand civilization through a hypothesized "primordial tradition", from which all cultural utterances are derived, and that it promotes metaphysics as the most important attribute of civilization. The discursive roots of the idea of a "primordial tradition" lie with the perennialist school.

The principle of perennialist philosophy is the (neo-platonic) idea that all metaphysical traditions and their various structures are derived from a hypothesized single and original metaphysical truth (Sedgwick 19). The symbols, rites, meanings, religious practices that are unique to Catholicism, Sufism, etc., when viewed from this totalizing perennialist perspective, are investigated in terms of outward "exoteric" similarity. As such, this school of thought motivates a comparative scholarship, in which the object of study is researched through a meta-historical point of view, such as the similarities between the meaning of certain spiritual concepts within different Indo-European traditions.

Guénon as a reactionary thinker

The traditionalist ideas of Guénon combine this perennialist notion of primordial tradition with a criticism of modernity, which he sees as the manifestation of the "Kali Yuga", a term within Hindu philosophy and faith that signifies the last cycle of a decline into a dark age. In this sense, Guénon is as

much a perennialist as a “modern antimodern” (Compagnon 9-13). This criticism of modernity as the Kali Yuga is at the heart of Guénon’s ideas. His work can be embedded within a philosophical and political framework that has critically engaged with the intellectual legacy of the Renaissance, Enlightenment theory, and the Reformation. These historical and intellectual moments capture the basis of the Guénonian concept of Modernity, which above all hypothesizes a form of spiritual absence in Western civilization. Modernity, more generally in Guénon’s works, is a designation for the historical period of industrialization and global imperialism, and the resulting deviations in the organization of human society, such as secularization.

The work of René Guénon and his disciples, sometimes branded as the school of traditionalism (Sedgwick 22), aims its criticism of modern society at the culture of reason often associated with the Enlightenment. Guénon, the scholar of esoterics and oriental culture, is at least in this prospect essentially a reactive 20th century thinker. His dictum “this so-called ‘rebirth’ proved to be the death of many things” (Guénon *Crisis* 36) illustrates his unusual position within this reactionary field. Guénon’s objection against the intellectual heritage of the Enlightenment and the Renaissance is voiced from a completely different perspective than for example Theodor Adorno’s (who is not a reactionary, but has voiced a widely-read critique on the Enlightenment) *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944), which uses the concept of *instrumental reason* to criticize the fundamental ideas of the Enlightenment. Guénon instead accuses the intellectual legacy of the Enlightenment for its supposed disruption of traditional values and thought. Framing Guénon as a sort of religious conservative however would mean grasping the content of his work only partly. The work of Guénon is closely related to the esoteric discourses of the 19th and 20th century (Ingram 203), such as theosophy, which he denounces in *Hindu Doctrines* as “a tissue of incoherent absurdities” (312), but still is viable to a comparison with his work. Other discourses of esotericism that can be compared with Guénon’s work are “Hermeticism, alchemy, Paracelsianism, Rosicrucianism, Christian Kaballah, Illuminism” (Ingram 203). Secondly, Guénon’s early work can be related, with some difficulty, to the general Orientalist fashion of 19th and 20th social sciences. It should be noted here however that Guénon’s work is an overcomplicated or even labyrinthian characterization of the Orient, rather than a simplification, and that he also specifically denounces the historical methods

of “official orientalist” (Guénon *Hindu Doctrines* 297) sciences (300). It emerges here that Guénon justifies his own work as a genuine characterization of the Eastern mentality and Eastern metaphysics.

Demystifying Guénon’s core ideas

The central idea in his most influential books, *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* (1921) and *The Crisis of the Modern World* (1921), is the proposition that for one, the geographical area denoted as “the east” is *traditional*, and secondly, that the geographical area denoted as “the west” is not; that the east continues to transmit and preserve within itself a certain “primordial” metaphysical tradition, which western civilization has discarded for the principles of reason that follow from Enlightenment values and humanism. To present a proper understanding of Guénon’s thought, I will first explain his methodology, and then his idiosyncratic use of three groups of interrelated concepts that function as the pillars of his writings: metaphysics and religion; mentality and civilization; intellect and reason. Demystifying the distinctions between these ideas will allow me to present a lucid image of Guénon’s concept of tradition.

Guénon’s methodology

In the foreword of his *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* (1921), René Guénon poses that understanding “The Orient” is a matter of enacting a “mentality” that corresponds to his understanding of the “eastern” set of mind. Guénon motivates his research as a truly intellectual approach to the study of eastern culture. He criticizes the historical methodologies of conventional research for being too western, i.e. too concerned with sheer encyclopedic erudition. Guénon criticizes the conventions of other academic research in the field of the Orient for existing merely to increase the erudition of a select group of experts, instead of a veritable exposition of the object of study itself. Reconstructing culture in academic discourse through quantifiable terms, Guénon argues, won’t lead to a veritable account of that culture. Because Guénon ascribes to eastern civilization a total historical linearity, studying it is not a matter of reconstructing it through linguistic or archeological research, but of reproducing a “mentality” that is able to conceive its intellectual qualities. The polemical tone (Ingram 202) of Guénon’s discourse means that his “form and content are inseparable” (Ingram 202).

Metaphysics and religion

Guénon's ideas rest on a hierarchical distinction between the concept of metaphysics and religion. The former can be characterized as being both *eastern* and *intellectual*, whereas the latter is (mostly) *western* and *practical*. Metaphysics, "everything beyond physics" (109), are derived from "the pure intellect" (118), to be understood in the Aristotelian sense, as opposed to scientific knowledge, which is derived from reason (118). Metaphysics is both universal and uncontestable, as it covers "the knowledge of principles belonging to the universal order" (110). As Guénon avoids a more specific definition of metaphysics, as it is by its nature unlimited to definition, it needs to be interpreted from his texts. The concept of metaphysics in Guénon's work describes an "intellectual" body of spiritual knowledge the epistemological claim of which to veracity and cultural value lies in its proposed originality and universality. Guénon hypothesizes the source of this metaphysics in the "hyperborean", a designation for a racistist creation myth, primordial tradition (Guénon *Crisis* 25), of which the eastern tradition is derived. This metaphysical tradition is manifested through doctrines that express different principles. Guénon often eludes on the content of these so called principles, but it is clear that in his eye, traditional civilizations are those that are structured on them. The tradition of this body of knowledge, its successful transmission, has secured the doctrinal value of the metaphysics Guénon refers to. The east, by which Guénon means the Indian, Chinese and Islamic civilizations, is rooted in these proposed ancient metaphysical doctrines.

Intellect and reason

Guénon contends that eastern civilization, which he divides in a near, middle and far region, has preserved a traditional metaphysics, because of the "natural aptitude for metaphysic" (41) its peoples possess. Knowledge in the west is built through methods of scientific enquiry, but in the east, according to Guénon, knowledge derives from intuition, based on the disposition of what he calls the mentality of the eastern peoples (Guénon *Hindu Doctrines* 116-117). Intuition for Guénon means not knowledge that is *ad hoc*, but rather knowledge that is directly derived from "the intellectual order" (44). The "intellectual order" is an ontological realm in which truth is immediate and direct (117), because the intuitive faculty of man allows a direct connection to everything that is intellectual. Metaphysics, for

Guénon, is something that belongs to this order of things. The knowledge produced by the faculty of reason, is entirely different from the intellectual nature of the metaphysical. The relation between knowledge and the individual in the east is not one of scrutiny, enquiry and falsification. Instead, the eastern individual accepts the intuitions that follow from his mentality.

Mentality and civilization

Guénon's notion of the metaphysical relies on an historical conception of eastern civilization through its "mentality". The arguments used to construct the binary between eastern and western mentality are often generalizing and typifying, and often veiled behind pseudo-historical and orientalist claims about both western and eastern civilization. Secondly, this notion of mentality fits within the pseudo-scientific framework of certain 20th century ideological tendencies that sought to deductively identify race and intellect. Next to this notion of mentality, his notion of eastern civilization is equally often defined by subjective parameters, argued with geographical and ethnic terms.

However, Guénon's philosophy of culture, which proposed to present a veritable account of eastern civilization and its metaphysics, can also be seemingly (post)modern in certain aspects. His epistemological critique on the 19th century classicist notion of the Greco-Roman origin of western civilization, seemingly amounts to a cultural philosophy of relation that seeks to understand and describe the relationality of cultural norms and values. Ultimately, however, Guénon's theories of civilizational relations and the transmission of metaphysical doctrines throughout history are deductive in nature. They replace one origin with another and deductively argue for how cultures and civilizations either preserve or stray from the original metaphysical doctrines that Guénon hypothesizes.

Guénon's ultimate position on mentality combines both a racialist and a geographical essentialist argument. Distinctions between different civilizations come down to a romanticist difference in mentality; which is linked to notions of race and place. For Guénon, race and mentality are identical. The European peoples that constitute the population of Western civilization are, unlike the generally homogenous divisions between the three large eastern civilizations, diverse. This lack of homogeneity is according to Guénon not only ethnic, but also historical. The historical basis of western civilization is largely derived from the cultural and intellectual legacy of Mediterranean civilizations, the Romans and

the Greeks. The content of this tradition is however unoriginal according to Guénon, which he defends with the vague historical claim that the intellectual content of Greek civilization is borrowed from eastern civilization. The historical disruption that Guénon formulates, from eastern totality to Greek corruption, allows him to create a hierarchical idea of traditional metaphysics between east and west. We could pose here that although it might seem that Guénon's primary object of study is Hindu culture and its textual tradition, he is more concerned with studying the relation between East and West from a perspective that elevates Eastern completeness over Western deficiency merely in order to accentuate that deficiency: "Guénon's primary aim is to formulate a rigorous critique of the West" (Ingram 207). This is an important idea to understand the relevance of Guénon's texts as a sort of inverted Orientalism, also named "affirmative Orientalism" (Fox in Ingram 207).

Civilization, for Guénon, means "the product and expression of a certain mental outlook common to a more or less widespread group of men" (Guénon *Hindu Doctrines* 89). Because of the intuitive and spiritual nature of eastern metaphysical knowledge, the eastern individual is uninterested in earthly matters altogether. Guénon takes the immaterial cultural entities as the object of his study, which are according to him represented and preserved by certain ancient texts, such as the Veda texts that he studies in the end of his *Hindu Doctrines*. These ancient texts provide Guénon with a genuine account of the tradition of a hypothesized "primordial truth". Guénon judges the value of civilization differently than most other occidental thinkers. For him, the accordance between eastern civilization and its preservation of traditional doctrines through different (religious) practices is what defines its greatness.

Tradition

Conventionally, the term *tradition* denotes a bundle of ideas, norms and values that derives its cultural significance from either a documented historical transmission, or alternatively, an oral transmission. Also commonly used is the derived adjective of *traditional*, which can signify a form of cultural conservatism, not specifically related to a certain tradition, such as certain interpretations of Catholicism. Semiotically, the word tradition can be grasped by returning to the Latin etymology of *tradere*, meaning 'to convey'. Guénon's definition of tradition is largely conflated with other terms in

his terminology, such as civilization, intellect and metaphysics.

The simplest aspect of tradition is that in order for it to be transmissible, it is documented. Tradition, Guénon writes, is both an oral and written phenomenon (Guénon *Hindu Doctrines* 87), and is by that definition identical to the collective of texts that said civilization has produced. I have written already that civilization for Guénon is a “mental outlook common to a more or less widespread group of men” (89). Yet Guénon also identifies Eastern civilization itself with tradition and identifies tradition as a sum of texts and oral transmissions. Tradition then becomes another attribute of what he understands as civilization. Civilization, for Guénon, is not merely a “whole body of techniques, institutions and beliefs common to a group of men during a certain time” (Guénon *Hindu Doctrines* 88), but should be understood through a binding and essential “intellectual element” (88) that is common to every civilization. Eastern civilization, which Guénon understands as entirely intellectual, is according to this definition of civilization identical to its tradition (89). Everything aspect of civilization, such as its social part, its religious part, etc., is in the East wholly traditional in Guénon’s thought. Guénon critique of the west is mounted on the notion that social institutions, for instance the legal system, are not traditional, because they base their values on the idea of justice, which is pertained by the written law. These institutions are organized by common intellectual principles, which, as the conventional notion of Western democracy denotes, are built on the idea of rationalistic epistemology. Contrarily, Guénon argues that institutions can be characterized as traditional, can only achieve that by adherence to a system of interrelated doctrines. Doctrines, in contrast to ideas, which are open and flexible, are constrained and given, ordered downwards throughout a system of hierarchy. In traditional society, doctrines inform knowledge instead of ideas. This means that Guénon’s idea of tradition is contra-rational or even anti-rational (Guénon *Crisis* 29). In the hierarchy that organizes traditional society, moreover, meaning originates solely in the divine. This is why Guénon says of tradition: “we refuse absolutely to give this name to anything that is of a purely human order” (Guénon *Crisis* 29).

This description of tradition as an oral/written composite of “intellectual” metaphysical texts, does however not capture the normative dimension that is inherent to the term. Tradition does not refer to any single body of texts, that body of texts is subject to subjective selection criteria. It is so that Guénon rejects the traditional value of the protestant scripture, and praises the traditional value of the

Hindu Veda texts, which formally happen to fit his composite oral/written textual definition. Further, this normative dimension is constituted by the programmatic nature of Guénon's *The Crisis of the Modern World* (1927) and its inverted Orientalism that seeks to denigrate the metaphysical status of Western culture. Guénon's work, and especially *Crisis*, can be seen as a rigorous and original critique of the West, in which the idea of tradition is its most fundamental critical instrument. Guénon's work is then an intellectual attack on the West, while it has been ignored as such. This is because of Guénon's limited reception in mainstream or academic audiences.

The polemic of tradition

Whilst Guénon's work cannot be reduced to a political manifest, at times, it can be read as such (Ingram 202). The Guénonian concept of tradition and its normative dimension (i.e. tradition is something that must be implemented politically), reveals the political potentiality of the concept of tradition as a dormant ideological position: Guénon's writing is "contentious, programmatic, and highly polemical. Polemic is, in fact, one of the principal modes of discourse that Guénon used to express his ideas in print" (Ingram 202). Brannon Ingram's article "René Guénon and the Traditionalist Polemic" (2007) analyses Guénon's work not for its ideas, but rather for its polemic rhetorical strategies and how they function to address a specifically targeted audience with prescriptive ideas. As Ingram notes, "polemic functions by creating polarities" (202). Guénon's style is steeped in these rhetorical figures: "East/West, traditional/modern . . . spiritual/temporal, order/disorder . . . knowledge/action" (202). The binary opposition of these terms is according to Ingram construed to guide a divided audience (202). Guénon's "esocentric" (Urban in Ingram 203) discourse practices a "dialectic of concealment and revelation" (Von Stuckrad in Ingram 204). Guénon's texts conceal meanings that open up to audiences that have been initiated in some way to be susceptible to its claims and knowledge.

When approached from this perspective, tradition can be understood as an ideological position. Tradition is a grassroots and decentralized praxis in which the follower attempts to resist the proposed spiritually decadent societies of the West by attempting to follow a traditional metaphysical path (Sedgwick 22). This traditionalist politics, at least in Guénon's writing is however not entirely reactionary. Often in his texts he assails the West from an anti-nationalist perspective, showing concern

for the tendencies of Western civilization to absorb and consume otherness (Guénon *Introduction* 31). It should be added here that Guénon's concern for the fate of Western civilization is not reactionary, Guénon is not defending Western values or culture: "There are those today who speak of a 'defense' of the west, which is odd, to say the least, considering that it is the West, as we shall see later on, that is threatening to submerge the whole of mankind in the whirlpool of its own confused activity" (Guénon *Crisis* 31).

Guénon's concept of tradition is paradoxically embedded within a tradition of polemical esotericism that, in order to criticize its opponents, refers readily to a "past, golden age" (Hammer & Von Stuckrad xv). Guénon's golden age is not even measurable by historic standards, but rather projected onto an unmapped, a-historical and mythical notion of pre-history; i.e. the glorious point in time in which tradition reigned civilization.

Guénon and Houellebecq

How is tradition applicable to *Soumission*? As I have written above, the term is deeply embedded within the boundaries of Guénon's metaphysical thought. Guénon believes that there is a "single universal truth, a *philosophia perennis* [eternal truth/philosophy] revealed to humanity during the earliest stages of human history" (Ingram 201). Tradition refers to the transmission of metaphysical principles or heritage of that perennial or primordial truth. Guénon believes that Eastern metaphysical culture is traditional, that is, an original transmission of a presupposed divine truth.

This divide between East and West in terms of their metaphysical character is central to Guénon's thought. Another important idea in Guénon's theory is the supposed decline of Western civilization, which comes down to the idea that the West has been severed from its metaphysical tradition, this phenomenon Guénon names the "divergence" (Guénon *Hindu Doctrines* 32-38). The severing of civilization from tradition, as Guénon hypothesizes, has destined the Western world to a form of civilizational decay. This decay was exacerbated by the Renaissance, which for Guénon merely represented an historical loop back into the origins of the Western divergence from Eastern tradition, the Greek civilization (Guénon *Hindu Doctrines* 36). For Guénon the Renaissance and the Reformation are the intellectual origins of the decay of Western tradition. The protestant ethic materialized in the

practice of “free criticism” (Guénon *Crisis* 61), that is to say a form of interpreting the traditional doctrines of Christianity “exclusively on the exercise of human reason” (Guénon *Crisis* 61). Guénon identifies Western civilization with Christendom (Guénon *Crisis* 15), and the ideas of the Renaissance and reformation according to Guénon, lay dormant in the “disruption of Christendom” (*Crisis* 15), which occurred alongside “the formation of ‘nations’ and the end of the feudal system” (*Crisis* 15). Resulting from this disruption with the culture of medieval Christianity, the Renaissance and Reformation marked a “definitive rupture with the traditional spirit” (Guénon *Crisis* 15). Modernity is then identified with the dwindling of civilization from the “traditional spirit”. To rekindle the relation between civilization and traditional metaphysics, Guénon suggests in his work, the West has to re-embrace tradition (Guénon *Crisis* 27).

Guénon’s theory and Houellebecq’s literature seem to share a disdain for the supposed decline of “Western civilization”. Like Houellebecq, Guénon’s theory imagines grand historical accelerations, such as the idea of the ‘Kali Yuga’ or the ‘crisis of the modern world’. The Spenglerian critique of modernity that is inherent to Houellebecq’s novels, poems and essayistic work, fits well within the declinism of Guénon’s thought. Guénon’s ideas appear in *Soumission* (2015), through the antagonist Robert Rediger, who is a fervent Guénonian. Following Guénon’s traditionalist thinking, the narrative of *Soumission* imitates a vaguely Guénonian spirit by representing an ‘Islamification’ of France.

Furthermore, Houellebecq’s casual misogynistic, anti-Islamic, and Euro-critic provocations have classified him as conservative author in the eyes of the public. Tradition, regardless of any signified affiliation to Guénon’s writings, is an all-encompassing political idea that is traceable in many literary traditions. Houellebecq’s literature describes an eclectic mix of political themes that are difficult to align with a conventional political view (Viard 127-129). A critique of liberal values is inherent to Houellebecq’s literature, but it cannot be reduced to it. Houellebecq’s work is deeply concerned with for example, the status of traditional religion in Europe, the influence of the European Union on the nation state; the status of the French nation state; the destruction of the traditional family; the implicated guilt of postmodern architecture in capitalism; sexual liberalism and feminism; the agony of supermarket shopping; the demographic consequence of immigration; all are implicated in the Houellebecqian notion

that the marginalized individual suffers under the weight of personal autonomy from the traditional superstructures of society.

Antimodern modernist

Concluding, Guénon's concept of tradition should be regarded as a characteristically modern idea. Not only does Guénon's theory contain a refusal of modernity from a metaphysical and esoteric perspective, but his polemic is based on the "very modernity that was so distasteful to him" (Hammer & Von Stuckrad xv). Enveloped within modernity, Guénon's work seeks to address the perceived issues of modern times not from within the disciplines of art, film or literature, or even conventional academic discourse such as philosophy, but rather from within a tradition of esotericism and a vaguely Hegelian sense of civilization and declinism. It provides the arguments for an attack on modern ideas such as secularism and humanistic values from a perspective that has appropriated the tradition of Eastern metaphysics and in that process has bent it to its will, which is the critique of Western modernity as a spiritually deficient society cut off from tradition.

The comparison between Houellebecq's literature and Guénon's notion of tradition should initiate with questioning the place of modernity within Houellebecq's work. How do Houellebecq's novels, as his oeuvre progresses, represent the idea of modernity? The hypothesis here is that Houellebecq's representation of modernity can be compared to Guénon's criticism of Western modernity. In Houellebecq's novels, modernity can be approached through different ideologies. It includes not only the idea of a spiritual degradation, but also a progression of innovation in science and technology, and ultimately, the rise of neoliberalism. A notion of what modernity means within Houellebecq's novels will enable me to question further how *Soumission* engages with the idea of tradition.

Chapter 2: Are Michel Houellebecq's novel's anti-modern?

Introduction

In this chapter, I will present a reading of different academic interpretations of Houellebecq's work. I will include texts by Carole Sweeney, Sabine van Wesemael and Louis Betty. This discussion will provide a necessary context for my subsequent reading of *Soumission*. Through comparative analysis, I will question to which degree the representation of modernity in Houellebecq's novels coincides with Guénon's description of Western modernity as a 'corruption of tradition'. First, I will review the arguments made by Carole Sweeney. Secondly I will discuss Louis Betty. Finally, I will present a critique in which I discuss these different interpretations, and why I think they are valuable to understand the Guénonianism of *Soumission*.

The two authors discussed in this chapter contribute two different interpretations of Houellebecq. The first interpretation analyzes Houellebecq's work as a subtle critique of capitalism and neoliberalism, the other approaches Houellebecq's work as a lament for the 'death of god'. When combined, they achieve a more complex notion of how modernity is represented in Houellebecq's work. I will argue how Houellebecq's representation of modernity is constituted by elements from both reactionary and progressive critiques of modernity; in this context I will question if it is possible to designate Houellebecq's literature as *anti-modern*.

A "withering critique of neoliberal capitalism"

Michel Houellebecq's France is a heavily urbanized secular state with a post-industrial capitalist economy, its citizens practice a liberal politics and believe in individualist principles. Since most of Houellebecq's novels take place in the 1990's, the space-time of the fabula is located on the threshold of modernity and post-modernity. It is evident to the reader that the fabula takes place in a sort of post-neoliberal society. For example, take how the protagonist of *Extension* describes the effect of a generalized commodification of society:

La règle est complexe, multiforme. En dehors des heures de travail il y a les achats qu'il faut bien effectuer, les distributeurs automatiques où il faut bien retirer de l'argent . . . Surtout, il y a les différents règlements que vous devez faire parvenir aux organismes qui gèrent les différents aspects de votre vie . . . Cependant, il reste du temps libre. Que faire? Comment l'employer? Se consacrer au service d'autrui? Mais, au fond, autrui ne vous intéresse guère . . . Mais rien en vérité ne peut empêcher le retour de plus en plus fréquent de ces moments où votre absolue solitude, la sensation de l'universelle vacuité, le pressentiment que votre existence se rapproche d'un désastre douloureux et définitif se conjuguent pour vous plonger dans un état de réelle souffrance (Houellebecq *Extension* 12-13).

And later on in the same chapter:

Sous nos yeux, le monde s'uniformise; les moyens de télécommunication progressent ; l'intérieur des appartements s'enrichit de nouveaux équipements. Les relations humaines deviennent progressivement impossibles, ce qui réduit d'autant la quantité d'anecdotes dont se compose une vie (16).

The composition of these two passages in the third chapter creates a sharp contrast. The commodification of society, where every service is marketable, disables the pleasure that is generated by authentic hobbies or pastimes. Lack of authentic human relationships, unmediated through this commodified society, is forcing the protagonist to face solitude and alienation from society. The technological progression of society, as the notion is explained here, serves the material interests of consumers, and goes hand in hand with this commodification and alienation. Houellebecq's first novel then sets the tone for a certain representation of capitalism that criticizes modernity as a futile progression towards systematic existentialist dread.

According to Carole Sweeney, this anti-capitalist dimension is crucial to Houellebecq's representation of modernity. Her main argument in *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair* (2013) is that Houellebecq's *literature of despair* is mounted on a biopolitical critique of neoliberal capitalism, which has seeped "into all areas of affective human life" (Sweeney *Despair* "Introduction"). Van Wesemael similarly argues that for Houellebecq "libéralisme économique et politique équivaut

violence, inégalité et la réduction de l'être humain aux lois de l'offre et de la demande" (Van Wesemael (2005) 73), which strengthens her earlier conclusion that "Houellebecq . . . [veut] montrer la dégradation de l'être moral dans notre société capitaliste contemporaine" (Van Wesemael 42).

Sweeney's notes that Michel Houellebecq's literature is "ideologically forked" (Sweeney *Despair* "Introduction"). Where Houellebecq's prose should be read as a "withering critique of neoliberal capitalism" ("Introduction"), it is simultaneously "complicit" ("Introduction") because "Houellebecq seems to refuse to condemn properly, ideologically or ethically, what, on the surface, he appears to be critiquing" ("Introduction"). Both Houellebecq's style, which she defines as a form harmonious with its content, "a banal, familiar, everyday non-literary language" ("Introduction"), along with his refusal to place himself within a particular tradition of French authorship ("Introduction"), contribute to what Sweeney deems the "un-dialectical space" of the Houellebecqian universe, which is unable to "envisage any space outside of that process where critical thinking might take place" ("Introduction"). Houellebecq's novels, according to Sweeney, approach the phenomenon of modernity through narrative, as "curiously old-fashioned *romans à thèses*" ("Introduction"). This main *thèse* in his work is based on a representation of neoliberal capitalism, through a "veneer of realism" in narrative ("Introduction"): namely the idea that "market principles have come to determine and define every aspect of human life" (Sweeney *Despair* ch. 2). The protagonists that drive the stories in his novels are uncomfortable with this modern situation, are unable to open themselves to a world of consumption and are condemned to wail "among the affective ruins of relentless commodification" (Sweeney ch. 2) While Houellebecq's flat and un-novelistic prose (ch. 2) pretends to be emotionally detached from this reality, beneath his style lies "a profoundly melancholic despair" (ch. 2), towards the effect of neoliberal capitalism on the human subject. Along with the penetration of the laws of the market into human life, Houellebecq's protagonists are burdened by their total freedom from traditional institutions, such as religion or class. In Sweeney's reading, the undoing of these traditional institutions is merely the stripping of the layers that exist between the self and the direct exposure to the market.

But as Sweeney writes, if Houellebecq is not a Marxist author, since most of these ideas align with a Marxist ideology, where does the difference emerge? According to Sweeney, the concept of neoliberalism represents a more relentless form of "reification", a Marxist concept that signifies a total

Verdinglichung in human relations, because the self has become a commodity that can be traded in quantifiable terms. Houellebecq's work narrates the historical situation of a society that underwent the "hegemonic victory of consumer capitalism" (Crowley in Sweeney ch.2) the 1990's:

The world presented in Houellebecq's writing, then, is an ideologically collapsed one in which there are no longer any clearly delineated demarcations between inside and outside, between public and private . . . it is a picture that refuses any kind of Marxist explanation (ch. 2).

Because Houellebecq's protagonists refuse an ideological gaze, they are able to witness the historical realities that ideology conceals. This confrontation with reality, in Sweeney's reading, explains the lethargy of Houellebecq's protagonists:

Houellebecq's characters singularly fail to achieve the requisite attachment to their own surplus value. Indifferent to the advantages of free enterprise, flexible working patterns and private ownership, they are set adrift in the networks of social, cultural and sexual deregulation (Sweeney "Introduction").

Houellebecq's characters are *damaged* by the capitalist society they dwell in. Unable to either conform to it or to resist it actively, they are caught in a lethargic cycle of non-existence. They find no means to capitalize economically or socially, and if their cultural capital brings them anything, it is a form of intellectual isolation. Sweeney's assessment that this vision of reality is not Marxist or dialectic, but rather devoid of ideology, remains problematic. In her reading, it constitutes not a Marxist critique of class consciousness, but rather a *rouge-brunist* worldview (ch. 2). Particular to French politics, the term *rouge-brunism* signifies an apparently contradictory political position that combines elements of 'red' working class ideology with 'brown' nationalist or national socialist ideas. Sweeney's reading shows how Houellebecq represents the macro-economic developments of modernity (ch. 2) in his work as an "unfettered capitalism" (ch. 2) which has transformed the self into a thing.

Not just a critique of neoliberal policy

This interpretation of Houellebecq's relation to modernity, in which he opposes the universal advancement of liberalism through criticizing capitalism, relies however heavily on a reading of

Houellebecq's first novel, *L'Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994). The implication in Sweeney's book, namely that Houellebecq's critique of modernity is to be identified completely as a critique on neoliberal capitalism, suggests there is not more to Houellebecq's representation of modernity than just a disdain for the influence of the American economic model on the individual subject (Betty *Without God* 1-3). Indeed, the idea that Houellebecq's entire oeuvre comes down to a critique of neoliberal policy, fails to comprehend a more extensive critique on modernity that can be found in Houellebecq's work. The academic work of scholar Louis Betty, which underlines Houellebecq as a "deeply and unavoidably religious writer" (Betty *Without God* 4), exposes the limitations of the political-literary paradigm of French Houellebecq studies, which have, according to Betty, failed to realize the importance of metaphysics in Houellebecq's oeuvre. As Betty suggests: "even a fairly cursory reading . . . reveals a deep interest on Houellebecq's part in the problems and prospects of 'human spiritual yearning' (Betty "Michel Houellebecq's 'Materialist Horror Stories'" (298). Houellebecq's novels are indeed often read from the perspective of the "social and psychological effects of materialism" on humans (299), but "Houellebecq's novels are also concerned with tracking the moral collapse of a civilization that has undergone a process of total secularization" (300).

Utopianism in Houellebecq's early novels

Instead of reading Houellebecq's work as a critique of "capitalism in its neoliberal biopolitical form" (Betty *Without God* 1), Betty contends this critique ultimately descends from a more fundamental concern for the relation between religion and society in France (7). This concern is, according to Betty, manifested in Houellebecq's second novel, *Les Particules Élémentaires*. *Particules* presents a double narrative of two half-brothers who, each in their own way, struggle with the social realities of modern, liberal society. In Betty's reading of *Particules*, the novel provides a serious fictional representation of Comtean Positivist theory (Betty "Autonomy" 9-10), and so "Houellebecq's most optimistic engagement with nineteenth-century utopian thought" (Promise of Utopia 104).

Comtean Positivism entailed a dialogue with religion, modernity and secularism, and can be placed in the general parameters of classical secularization theory. It theorizes history as three distinct, subsequent phases: the *theological*, the *metaphysical*, and the *positive*. This categorization is

chronologic and is analogous to the notion of history as progression that is intrinsic to Enlightenment discourse. The *theological* stage of mankind is projected on the Middle ages and its theological, Christian discourse. Then, the *metaphysical* stage is a reaction to this former one, as the Enlightenment has replaced the theological foundations with Enlightenment values. Ultimately, what is to be followed is a *positivist* stage, where scientific views dominate and push away all former metaphysics, which are replaced by a new *Religion of Humanity*. In Betty's analysis, the story of *Particules*

follows Comte's historical prognosis nearly to the letter—for not only has religion disappeared from civilized life at the dawn of the twenty-first century, but metaphysical values inherited by the Enlightenment, such as human dignity and rights, individualism, and progress, no longer convince anyone. Metaphysics, in other words, has failed to solve the existential dilemmas that God's death . . . first ushered in at the advent of modernity (Betty "Promise of Utopia" 99)

In Betty's reading, *Particules* is a Utopian novel that fictionalizes the theory that society is following the inevitable trend of secularization. This idea is epitomized by classical secularization theory, which states that the spread of reason as an institution, has enabled more and more people to challenge the views of the Church, and on a personal level, the idea of God.

A gradual exhaustion of utopian confidence

According to Betty "[Houellebecq's] novels can be interpreted as a novelistic *mise-en-scène* of classical secularization theory" (Betty *Without God* 5). Importantly however, Betty states that Houellebecq's oeuvre seems to shift this notion as it progresses. While the fabula of *Particules* seems to narrate the *fictional mise-en-scène* of that idea, Betty argues that Houellebecq's later novels dispose of this Utopian narrative. The "utopian strain[s]" present in his novels culminate, throughout all his publications, as:

[a] progressive disenchantment with nineteenth-century Utopian remedies to social and existential ills . . . in favor of a more traditional form of social order evocative of the social,

spiritual, and moral values of the Old Regime: Family, Land and Church (Betty “Promise of Utopia” 98).

This “progressive disenchantment” is a “gradual exhaustion of utopian confidence” (Betty “Promise of Utopia” 98) and can be read as a red line throughout Houellebecq’s novels. The initial utopianism of Houellebecq’s oeuvre disintegrates as it progresses. The engagement with Positivism amounts to a situation that appears untenable as Houellebecq’s oeuvre progresses. According to Betty, Comte’s *Religion of Humanity* hasn’t brought salvation from the existential dread that characterizes the Houellebecqian fictional universe. Adversely, the fictional mise-en-scène of Comtean theory is a literary instrument to arouse an anxiety towards the disruption of values of traditional society (Betty “Promise of Utopia” 100):

the Enlightenment that stripped the extant political and social orders of their divine sanction, and thus the notion of Right represented an attempt to ground morality and social existence in something other than God. In lifting this divine canopy, however, the promulgation of individual rights set the stage for the progressive atomization of social relations that reaches its apogee in *Les Particules Élémentaires* (Betty Promise of Utopia 101).

The techno-utopian optimism of *Particules* is accompanied by the novelization of the “atomization of social relations”. Even though sociologists of religion argue for the persistence of religion in the West (Habermas 17), Houellebecq’s novels formulate a modern, Positivist universe that fails to supply mankind with meaningful relations.

A return to tradition?

Where *Particules* and *La Possibilité d’une Île* are engaged with the attempt of imagining utopian alternatives to a post-Enlightenment society, they realize the impossibility of a Comtean future that be experienced as meaningful. While these novels simultaneously exhibit an anxiety towards the disruption of traditional values and institutions, *La Carte et le territoire* (2010) takes this idea further and instead explores restorative alternatives to the utopian restructuring of society.

The terrorist attack that ends *Plateforme* creates a deafening silence in Houellebecq’s initial

flirting with nineteenth-century utopianism and leads towards the ending of *Carte* (Betty “Autonomy” 29), where the protagonist Jed Martin ends his decade long seclusion in the French countryside to discover that France has undergone a complete economic and political restructuring in his absence. The decline of industrial France has developed towards a tourist-based economy in which the countryside, repopulated by young urbanites with a sense for traditional values, forms the backbone of the economy.

In *Carte* Houellebecq

“is exploiting . . . [the] demise [of modernity] as a means of imagining a world where social harmony and personal happiness are no longer predicated on individualism, self-determination, and rights, but rather on one’s placement within a meaningful system of institutions and social constraints (Betty “Promise of Utopia” 107).

Carte could thus be read as an ironic reaction towards an Enlightenment utopianism: “an anti-modern utopia capable of overcoming the disenchantment with nineteenth-century utopian thought that Houellebecq’s previous novels enact” (Betty “Promise of Utopia” 107). The “notion of human destiny” present in Enlightenment discourse and Comtean utopianism, is replaced by a *tension* between “the human need for liberty, which is grounded in the enlightened metaphysics of human rights, individualism, and secularism, and the desire for tradition and, ultimately, the metaphysical consolations of theology and religious faith” (Betty “Autonomy” 28).

Subsequently, Betty’s thesis that Houellebecq’s novels portray an exhaustive relation with the intellectual heritage of utopianism, has opened up the interpretation that much of Houellebecq’s prose is concerned with the acceleration of secularization in modernity and that it displays a fundamental anxiety to the disruption of values that is often labeled to the effects of Enlightenment culture. As Betty puts it: “Houellebecq’s fiction (as well as his non-fiction and poetry) expresses worries about the prospects of a civilization that has cut itself off from the sacred (Betty “Autonomy” 32).

Materialist horror

Whilst realizing the importance of a critique of liberalism in Houellebecq’s oeuvre (Betty *Without God* 8), Betty redirects the sociological value of Houellebecq’s novels to the idea that “The

unbinding of humanity from God lies at the heart of the historical narrative the reader encounters in Houellebecq's work" (*Betty Without God* 11); which would mean that in Houellebecq's critique on modernity, the individual's exposure to the laws of the free market, is but one of the results of a larger, spiritual deficit, namely the humanist exposure to the personal autonomy that is guaranteed by the secular state (*Betty* "Autonomy" 27).

The image of modernity that arises in Houellebecq, *Betty* suggests with his notion of fictional experiment, is that of a "materialist horror". This concept takes meaning in the historical narrative of ideologies that *Betty* describes. After the Second world war, American liberal economics vanquished other attempts to "organize society according to nontheological principles" (*Betty Without God* 11), leading to the conditions for Thatcher's famous dictum 'there is no alternative'. A "generalized belief in matter" (*Betty Without God* 11), which is opposed to "Anything not belonging to the world of matter – souls, gods, ghosts and the like" (*Betty* "Materialist Horror Stories" 299), thus prevailed as European nations rebuilt themselves. The ideology of materialism, which denotes the "limiting of all that is real to the physical" (*Betty Without God* 11), leaves no space for "personal freedom", "human dignity" and "progress" (Houellebecq in *Betty Without God* 11), which the fictional universe of Houellebecq's novels decompose. The situation brought upon Western society, in which human life lacks transcendent meaning (*Betty Without God* 5), is according to *Betty* the central point of exposure that Houellebecq's fiction enacts through a form of literary experiment.

The experience of materialist horror ascribed to Houellebecq's fiction by *Betty*, is thus embedded in a fictional universe that appears as an experimental literary representation of the status of religion. Houellebecq's texts fictionalize the ideas of classical secularization theory, advocated by Marx, Weber, Comte, etc., which theorized the interrelation of progression with modernity and the secularization of its society (or adversely: the incompatibility of religion and modernity) and ignores a modern sociological account of religion, championed by Jürgen Habermas, that argues for and proves the persistence of religion, broadly interpreted, in the contemporary West. (Habermas 18). As a more "metaphysical Zola" (*Betty Without God* 5-6) Houellebecq imagines in his novels how humanity, under the influence of a widespread "materialism", is conditioned by "God's absence and the submission to matter that such absence demands" (*Betty Without God* 6). By inverting the reality of religion in Europe,

which apparently has survived the Enlightenment and the intellectual secularization of society, Houellebecq has created a fundamental tension at the heart of his oeuvre, that can be approached as a conflict between modernity and tradition.

Progressive or conservative?

In my exposition of Betty's and Sweeney's work on the idea of modernity in Houellebecq, I have created a tension between on the one hand, an interpretation of Houellebecq that centers on the critique of capitalism, and on the other, an interpretation of Houellebecq that centers on a progressive exhaustion with Utopian ideas. Far from being contradictory, these two interpretations are congruent. They showcase how Houellebecq's novels are so polyphonic in their critique of modernity. But why are Houellebecq's novels so critical towards modernity?

The essay "Approches du Désarroi" (Houellebecq *Koude Revolutie* 201-220) illustrates the unique representation of modernity throughout Houellebecq's oeuvre. In this essay Houellebecq the essayist approaches the architectures of the business district of La Défense as an instrument of capitalism, designed to provide a false sense of transparency of the inner workings that drive the trends of the free market. The forces of free market capitalism, liberal policies, in combination with the acceleration of the processes that distribute information and atomize social relations, the essay suggests, have corrupted the social fabric of society. The arguments of this essay suggest a link between its economic critique and a critique of values. Through this essay Houellebecq might appear as a progressive critic of modernity; cynical of technological advancement and the benefits that the free market bestows upon European economies and peoples. But as Van Wesemael implies, his critique on capitalism is embedded in a more fundamental critique on modernity. Houellebecq, Van Wesemael writes, wants to show his audience :

un lent déclin, comme une corruption progressive du monde . . . ils [Houellebecq et Beigbeder] nous offrent un spectacle de fin du monde. Ils ont en commun le désir de mettre au jour et de réprover un état de décadence de l'univers social. Les maux dénoncés sont le capitalisme vainqueur. Le consumérisme, l'individualisme et le libertinage sexuel (Van Wesemael 42).

What motivates his critique of capitalism exactly? Is it, as Sweeney implies, a profound humanistic concern for the turn of the world? Is it, as Betty suggest, a concern for the disappearance of the metaphysical in occidental society? Or, is it rather, as Van Wesemael argues, motivated from a sort of decadent seclusionism that expresses merely a fear of the progression that modernity implies?

il [Houellebecq] se complâit à proclamer une réaction néo-conservatrice (femme au foyer, restitution de la famille et de la religion comme pierres angulaires de la société) . . . Houellebecq combine cet appel réactionnaire à un retour aux normes et valeurs traditionnelles (Van Wesemael 82)

The reactionary and conservative ideas in Houellebecq's novels coexist with his critique of capitalism, that critique is a fundamental part of the progressive corruption and decline that is being represented through the narratives of his novels. The central tenet of Houellebecq's oeuvre, namely the illusion of personal autonomy that is propagated by liberal politics, which in turn has destroyed a general belief in a relational system characterized by family, tradition and church (Betty "Promise of Utopia" 98), can thus only be properly understood by placing it in the context of reactionary and conservative concepts and ideas (Van Wesemael 40).

Modernity vis-à-vis Guénon's concept of tradition

As argued in the first chapter, Guénon's notion of tradition is deeply embedded within his understanding of modernity. According to Guénon, certain historical events have created a metaphysical divide between the East and the West. Modernity is a complex of progressions in technology, the idea of the polity, and global trade, leading to industrial developments, separation between church and state, and the rise of nation states. Guénon's historical lens stresses the events that have contributed to the decline of what he describes as 'tradition'. As I also argued, Guénon's text is not merely a descriptive representation of history. Guénon's notion of tradition is a normative concept that evaluates the fundamental ideas of modernity as undesirable. This dimension characterizes Guénon's view of the Western world as a sort of damaged imitation of Eastern traditionalism. According to Guénon, the key ideas and moments that shaped European history in the early modern period, such as those brought forth

by Enlightenment thinkers, are antithetical to what he understands as the key concepts of Eastern intellectualism. For example, Guénon's concept of Eastern intellect and knowledge professes that knowledge should not be attained through reasonable thinking and questioning, but rather that knowledge is given through a system of hierarchy. Intellect, therefore, means following a certain 'metaphysical intuition'. Modernity, for Guénon, is another instance of Western separation that represents a final divorce from Eastern traditionalism.

Antimodern?

Guénon's work is evidently anti-modern. With exception from the period of high medieval Christendom, Guénon rejects the idea of 'European history' as a "modern confusion" (Guénon *Crisis* 97). To elucidate his views in his own words:

What has never been seen before is the erection of an entire civilization on something purely negative [individualism], on what indeed could be called the absence of principle; and it is this that gives the modern world its abnormal character and makes of it a sort of monstrosity, only to be understood if one thinks of it as corresponding to the end of a cyclical period [the Kali-Yuga] (*Crisis* 55).

Although it is difficult to designate Guénon's antimodernism in all its facets, it consists generally out of two interconnected pillars. First of all, an aversion of "materialism". Western civilization, in Guénon's view, is dominated by liberal ideology that professes "the importance of economic factors . . . in the lives of people and of individuals: industry, commerce finance—these seem to be the only thing that count" (*Crisis* 87). Briefly, materialism in the West means an obsession with things, instead of spirituality. Secondly, a rejection of "individualism". As the modern West places the individual in the center of the world, it negates the traditionalist principle that "genuine spirituality" (*Crisis* 55) is derived from the "supra-human" (55). These two ideas, individuality and materialism, have created a definitive break with the traditional worldview.

In a way, Guénon's attack on modern values situates him within the French tradition of thinkers called *antimodernes*. According to Antoine Compagnon, the antimodern attitude is mainly "une réaction, une résistance au modernisme, au monde moderne, au culte du progrès . . . Il désignait le doute,

l'ambivalence, la nostalgie, plus qu'un rejet pur et simple" (Compagnon 9). The antimoderns, Compagnon says, are paradoxically *ultramodern* in their ways, like Baudelaire, whose modernism is inseparable from his resistance against modern practices. The antimodern is a modernist who is "pris dans le mouvement de l'histoire mais incapable de faire son deuil du passé" (13). The idea of the antimodern designates the literary figure who is not really right-wing, but is definitely resisting the left, a refugee in literature from the results of the French Revolution (Compagnon 10-11).

At least on these two points, which I have illustrated with Sweeney and Betty, Houellebecq's representation of modernity slightly merges with Guénon's critique. Reading Guénon's critique allows a different interpretation of Houellebecq's novels that underlines the antimodern elements of his novels. Like Guénon's critique, Houellebecq's novels represent modern civilization as individualistic and materialistic.

Beyond Modernity?

By outlining these different interpretations of Michel Houellebecq, I have attempted to create a complex image of what modernity means within Houellebecq's work. Michel Houellebecq can be read as a progressive critic of neoliberal capitalism, but also as an author who is disillusioned by 19th century Utopianism and flirts with traditional ideas instead and as a conservative *antimodern* who comments upon modern affairs from within a decadent seclusion.

Houellebecq's polyphonic critique of modernity is achieved by a narrative representation of different theories or ideologies that can be associated with modernity: the proliferation of neoliberal capitalism, the disappointing solutions of 19th century Utopianism, a disbelief in Enlightenment values. Modernity in Houellebecq should then be approached as a complex idea that is integrated into the fabula of his novels. The semantics of this concept is clear. Houellebecq's novels go beyond a progressive critique of capitalism, they approach modernity from a conservative or reactionary position. As Betty has shown, especially the later novels *Carte* and *Soumission* exhibit Houellebecq's gradual exhaustion with Utopian solutions. As Betty has suggested, these novels can be interpreted as a subversive commentary on the 'metaphysics of materialism' that, at least in his fiction, grips Western society. Instead they imagine that France returns to traditional society. Could it be that Houellebecq's literature

enacts a sort of traditionalist sensibility for the decline of modernity? Additionally, does Houellebecq's larger critique of materialism fit within a traditionalist ideology instead? By analyzing the representation of modernity in Houellebecq's work, I have attempted to make a traditionalist reading of Houellebecq possible, by showing how his work diagnoses a spiritual deficit in modernity. In the next chapter I will engage with these questions to conduct a close reading of *Soumission* (2015) as a Guénonian novel.

Chapter 3: *Soumission* as a Guénonian novel?

“All of Houellebecq’s novels are concerned in one way or another, and to varying degrees, with the decline and disappearance of religion in the West” (Betty “Autonomy” 32)

Introduction

As I pointed out in the previous chapter, the narrative of Houellebecq’s novels represents an image of modernity that alters as his oeuvre progresses. *Extension* can be read primarily, as Sweeney has argued, as a critique on the proliferation of neoliberal capitalism and its affection beyond the boundaries of the market. *Particules*, Houellebecq’s second novel, is a quasi-Utopian novel that, in Betty’s interpretation, doubts that humanity can exist without traditional religious institutions and faith. *Carte*, Houellebecq’s fifth full novel, takes this idea further and wanes from any Utopian ideas in the final section of the novel. This is why Betty has described *Carte* as an *anti-modern utopia* (Betty “Promise of Utopia” 107). Both Houellebecq’s criticism towards neoliberal capitalism, and his concern for the disruption of traditional values, contribute to the anti-modernism of Houellebecq’s novels. In a shallow sense, Houellebecq’s anti-modernism and Guénon’s are comparable in their aversion of individualism and materialism. But does that make Houellebecq a Guénonian?

In this chapter I will turn to an interpretation of *Soumission* (2015), in which I analyze the traditionalist or Guénonian elements of the novel. As a sort of spiritual successor to *Carte*, the fabula of the novel represents a total return to a traditional society, and by doing so, it presents a rather Guénonian narrative. I will closely read the ideas of the character of Robert Rediger, who practices a Guénonian politics. Can we state that *Soumission* enacts through fictional experiment a sort of society that resembles Guénon’s traditionalist vision? If so, can we say that *Soumission* is a Guénonian novel?

Secondly, after analyzing the place of tradition in these novels, I will introduce a notion of narrative acceleration in Houellebecq’s novels. Building on that notion of acceleration, I question how it can be related to Houellebecq’s complex representation of modernity. Answering that question, I hypothesize, will allow me to identify the traditionalism of *Soumission*.

Representation of Islam in Houellebecq’s novels

Before I present my own reading, I will discuss the representation of Islam in Houellebecq's novels. In his article "Michel Houellebecq's shifting representation of Islam: From the death of God to counter-Enlightenment" (2017), Camil Ungureanu argues that Houellebecq's representation of Islam throughout his oeuvre is shifting. In his early novels "Islamic monotheism is pitted against capitalism and is fated to die out" (Ungureanu 515). As I have discussed in the previous chapter, on various occasions Houellebecq refers to the idea of positivism as a substitute for authentic metaphysics. As Ungureanu continues his argument, in *Soumission* Houellebecq's representation of Islam shifts (515):

In the new script, modernity collapses and is superseded by the belief in God in its Islamic form. Far From being dystopian or even politically neutral, *Submission* builds the tableau of a society pivoting around a fictional total Islam capable of providing the exit from personal and social crises (Ungureanu 521).

Ungureanu's reading suggests that *Soumission* re-evaluates Islam as a "way out of personal crisis and Europe's decline" (Ungureanu 515). In this sense, *Soumission* is not a dystopian narrative that warns against a possible Islamic democratic revolution in Europe, but rather an anti-Enlightenment narrative (515). This interpretation provides an interesting analysis of how Houellebecq's oeuvre shifts its representation of Islam, a topic that is often subjected to many negative criticisms by Houellebecq's protagonists. It attempts to understand how Houellebecq's rejection of Positivism can be juxtaposed to his representation of Islam. Ungureanu understands this as a "turn [that] is opposed to modernity and favorable to a reconsideration of Islam as the religion of submission and a remedy to personal crisis and Europe's decline" (514). Where Ungureanu notes that *Plateforme*, which is Houellebecq's first novel in which Islam is a major part of the narrative, is caught up in a juxtaposition between a morally collapsed West and a backward Islamic culture; *Soumission* contains a more layered and complicated representation of Islam. According to Ungureanu, the *leitmotif* (522) of *Soumission* is the mise-en-abyme-like relationship between François, and Europe's "broader crisis" (522): they are both going through a crisis of faith. Islam, voiced by Rediger, is then "portrayed as the religion of strong-willed men capable of superseding Europe's decline" (522). The position that Houellebecq takes here according to Ungureanu, is that Islam in *Soumission* is represented as the "religion of the future"

(523) of Europe. By enacting this representation of Islam, which has evolved from its representation in *Plateforme*, “Houellebecq radicalizes his earlier criticism by proclaiming the *death* of Enlightenment, *laïcité* and political modernity” (524). Further than that, this representation of Islam, according to Ungureanu, is the consolidation of Houellebecq’s oeuvre as a literary critique of modernity; a literary oeuvre that represents “the death of modernity” (524) in various fashions, but ultimately not as the inevitable decline of capitalism itself, but as a return to a traditional way of life.

Tradition in Michel Houellebecq’s novels

How can that representation of Islam in *Soumission* be related to Guénon’s writings? First of all, it is almost as if *Soumission* is a fictional representation of Guénon’s main thesis, namely that for one, the West is lacking in tradition and needs a traditional incentive to sustain itself as a civilization. To recap what tradition exactly means: tradition, simply put, is “la spiritualité authentique” (Rousseau 119) sustained by the socio-cultural institutions that fortify the dominant potency of the notion of tradition within a given culture. Guénon has conceptualized a notion of the West as an entity that is historically and metaphysically divided from the East, an entire civilization that is ideologically rejecting tradition. Tradition is a complex of ideas that grouped together present a threefold vision: a study or description of the metaphysical according to the idea of the perennial truth; secondly, following from the first, a doctrine of spirituality. In this sense, we can understand the difference between a classic adherent of religion, who in their faith submits themselves to God, and a traditionalist, who practices spirituality in name of a divine truth that transcends religious divinity to seek and understand a presupposed common denominator in every religious tradition. Thirdly, tradition presents a normative evaluation of modernity, in which history itself is understood as a decline from an ahistorical phase of civilization in which the absolution of the metaphysical was unchallenged by reason. Understood in this way, the legacy of Guénon’s work signifies a system of ideas with a dormant ideological potency, it provides a normative vision of the individual and of how society should be organized.

How exactly does tradition as such emerge within Houellebecq’s novels? The relation of Houellebecq’s literature to the idea of tradition can be commenced by exploring the direct reference to René Guénon in *Soumission* (2015) and *La Carte et le territoire* (2010). This reference I will outline in

the following paragraphs. I will argue that the traditionalist comparison is evident in *Soumission*. However, we cannot take for granted that Houellebecq is a traditionalist or promotes such ideas. Then, how can this reading be problematized? Why, if it is possible to answer such a question, does Houellebecq experiment in his novel with the advent of a traditionalist politics?

La Carte et le territoire, a traditionalist utopia?

Carte briefly mentions Guénon's name and the content of his ideas. In a passage in which the protagonist Jed talks to his father, Jed's father tells him about the former resident of his house in Raincy, a professor of religion. This professor had contempt for Guénon, wrote many criticisms of his books and called him "Cet imbécile de Guénon" (Houellebecq *Carte* 224), Jed's father tells his son in an anecdote. This short reference is the first moment where readers can encounter Guénon's name in Houellebecq's prose. That the novel mentions the name of Guénon is peculiar, because it doesn't mention him later, nor is it clear why Guénon's name is brought up in the first place. Also noteworthy is the negative sentiment that is associated with Guénon here.

In the last part of *Carte* a situation emerges in which a more implicit, yet more extensive, reference to traditionalist ideas is made. Jed, the protagonist, after living in seclusion in the French countryside for a long period of time, emerges from his isolation to find that in his absence France has undergone a tremendous change in its economic and political landscape. A new generation has settled the French 'hinterlands' and repurposed its economy into a tourist economy. These newly arrived inhabitants of the Creuse area, the narrator describes, show themselves to believe in conservative values:

Cette nouvelle génération se montrait davantage conservatrice, davantage respectueuse de l'argent et des hiérarchies sociales établies que toutes celles qui l'avaient précédée. De manière plus surprenante, le taux de natalité était cette fois effectivement remonté en France, même sans tenir compte de l'immigration, qui était de toute façon presque tombée à zéro depuis la disparition des derniers emplois industriels et la réduction drastique des mesures de protection sociale intervenue au début des années 2020 (*Carte* 417).

The notion of tradition that emerges in these quotes is only partly Guénonian. Guénon's idea of tradition, as apart from the conventional sense, primarily signifies a hierarchical evaluation of the metaphysical above the material. These quotes do not necessarily create the image of a society that has suddenly restructured itself on a lost metaphysical tradition, such as Catholicism. Rather it presents a sort of society that has enacted a synthesis between a neoliberal ideology, evident in the business mindedness of the new *arrivants*, and traditional values such as family.

An important counterweight to this vaguely traditionalist Utopia, is the focalization of protagonist Jed. Jed's last artistic works, which are audiovisual/multimedia installations of playmobil characters in desolate and futuristic urban landscapes, problematize this utopian world that Houellebecq is representing. The final passage of the novel suggests that Jed work is mourning the passing of Europe's industrial age, and is not celebrating these developments.

Soumission: fictionalizing a Guénonian politics

Despite *Carte's* ambivalent representation of a restorative traditional society, the place of tradition is more prominent in *Soumission* (Rousseau 117). The fabula of the novel works towards the political constitution of an eerie Guénonian world. In the penultimate section of *Soumission*, during a lengthy and theoretical dialogue between the protagonist and Robert Rediger, the new president of the Sorbonne and a secretary of state in the new government of Ben Abbes, Guénon appears as the subject of the dissertation of Rediger. It is revealed that Rediger is a driving force in the new France, which is now governed by a coalition headed by an Islamic political party. As the new dean of the Sorbonne, Rediger is tasked with staffing the rearranged university. Next to his political ambitions, Rediger is the author of many articles and other popular publications in which he vocalizes the importance of a return to tradition through Islam. The protagonist, after Rediger has attempted to convert him so he may resume his teaching position at the Sorbonne, analyses that the ideas of Guénon must have had a profound influence on Rediger's political ideas (*Soumission* 272). As the protagonist reads through Rediger's different publications, some more accessible than others, we learn of Rediger's political ideas, his Islamic spiritualism and his interest in Guénon's theory:

L'article, clair et documenté, trahissait nettement l'influence de Guénon, sa distinction fondamentale entre les civilisations traditionnelles, prises dans leur ensemble, et la civilisation moderne (271)

J'étais, bizarrement, davantage attiré par sa fibre guénonienne - il est vrai que Guénon à lire dans sa totalité est un auteur assez chiant, et que Rediger en offrait une version accessible, une version light (*Soumission* 274)

Indeed, Rediger's ideas on political Islam can be approached as Guénonian. The protagonist's simple summary of Guénon's distinction between modern and traditional civilization has become for the figure of Rediger the basis for a politics that wants to redistribute the relation between church and state. Notions of the Enlightenment, such as the idea of personal autonomy from both religion and state, are discarded by Rediger's thinking. Such a desecularisation is necessary in the eyes of Rediger, since individualism is not strong enough to form an authentic social cohesion. Only religion is able to constitute a *total relation* between individuals:

Seule une religion, essayait de démontrer l'article, pouvait créer, entre les individus, une relation totale. Si nous considérons, écrivait Rediger, un graphe de liaison, soit des individus (des points) reliés par des relations personnelles, il est impossible de construire un graphe plan reliant entre eux l'ensemble des individus. La seule solution est de passer par un plan supérieur, contenant un point unique appelé Dieu, auquel seraient reliés l'ensemble des individus ; et reliés entre eux, par cet intermédiaire (274)

Rediger's critique of individualism and the notion that religion can bind humanity to a larger principle, are inherently Guénonian. As Guénon explains in chapter 5 "Individualism" of *The Crisis of the Modern World*, it is the idea of individualism that is "the determining cause of the present decline of the West" (*Crisis* 55), because it is "the absence of principle" itself (*Crisis* 55). Individualism, personal autonomy from the institutions of the state and church guaranteed by the division of power in a democratic nation, eliminates the ability of man to subordinate himself to the "supra-human element[s]" of tradition (*Crisis* 55). In individualistic society there is the "negation of intellectual intuition" (*Crisis* 56) and because

knowledge is approached through the purely intellectual faculty Guénon has described, metaphysics, “the knowledge that constitutes the true province of this intuition” (*Crisis* 56) is inaccessible for the mind of modern man. Secondly, individualism means that the individual can refuse to accept authority that exceeds himself (*Crisis* 60), whereas in traditional society, man would concede authority to the “supra-human order” (*Crisis* 60). Whether or not Rediger and Guénon agree on the concept of religion is more ambiguous here. Guénon understands religion as a conjunction between the intellectual and the social, and Rediger’s argumentation seems to omit much of Guénon’s insistence on the metaphysical need for humanity to submit to the supra-human order of intellectuality. Rather he voices a political sort of Islam based on Guénon’s principles, but is excluding the many peculiar traditionalist beliefs of Guénon, such as his perennialism. Rediger’s Guénonian influence then seems to be mainly the political one that is found in the Guénon of *The Crisis of the Modern World*.

The political relevance of *Soumission* as a novel is embodied within the character of Robert Rediger (Rousseau 117). In the contemporary debate on immigration and its influence on French norms, values or culture, this novel voices through Rediger a perspective that is unique. Instead of the often attributed accusations of xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments, *Soumission* laments the impact of modernity on French tradition and brings a form of Guénonian thinking to the foreground of this anti-modernity:

Il était tragique, plaidait-il [Rediger] avec ferveur, qu’une hostilité irraisonnée à l’islam les empêche de reconnaître cette évidence : ils [les identitaires et traditionalistes français] étaient, sur l’essentiel, en parfait accord avec les musulmans. Sur le rejet de l’athéisme et de l’humanisme, sur la nécessaire soumission de la femme, sur le retour au patriarcat : leur combat, à tous points de vue, était exactement le même. Et ce combat nécessaire pour l’instauration d’une nouvelle phase organique de civilisation ne pouvait plus, aujourd’hui, être mené au nom du christianisme ; c’était l’islam, religion sœur, plus récente, plus simple et plus vraie (car pourquoi Guénon par exemple s’était-il converti à l’islam? Guénon était avant tout un esprit scientifique, et il avait choisi l’islam en scientifique, par économie de concepts ; et pour éviter, aussi, certaines croyances irrationnelles marginales, telles que la présence réelle dans

l'Eucharistie), c'était l'islam, donc, qui avait aujourd'hui repris le flambeau. À force de minauderies, de chatteries et de pelotage honteux des progressistes, l'Église catholique était devenue incapable de s'opposer à la décadence des mœurs (*Soumission* 275)

Rediger's Guénonian thinking is manifest in his appreciation for the medieval Christian faith (Rousseau 119), and in his diagnosis of western decadence (119). As with Guénon, Rediger combines these two ideas into the single proposition that the West, using that evocative and Guénoneseque metaphorical language, has died. Rediger's main motivation here, paradoxically like Guénon, is to revive Western civilization "organically", not for itself, but in name of traditional values. Rediger's narrative of a historical decline of civilization in the West, is identical to Guénon's. Humanism, atheism, loss of morals and values have created a crisis of tradition. Even the catholic church in Rediger's eyes has become incapable of resisting a degradation of traditional values. In a Guénonian and traditionalist turn, Rediger has decided that in order to restore traditional society in France, the present conservative religious forces that are stuck in a non-disagreement, should overcome their differences. Their division is caused by the historical tension between Christianity and Islam. Rediger's readiness to embrace Islam in favor of Christian faiths signifies that he aligns with Guénon's core ideas. Overcoming mere historical religious difference, in favor of the eternal truth that is manifest in all traditional religion, is necessary to restore the diagnosed "crisis".

Rediger's politics might seem paradoxical in the eyes of modern readers and academic commentators that are unfamiliar with Guénon. Rediger is attempting to "save" the West, but in doing so he deters from a classic nationalistic and reactionary agenda. The political embracement of Islam in the fabula of *Soumission*, on the level of citizens, politicians, academics, is possibly its most misunderstood idea. In the eyes of readers, it signifies either Islamophobia, Islamophilia, or an attack of leftist intellectuals; reading Rediger's ideas from a Guénonian perspective however reveals that there are no contradictions. Rediger believes in *the strange death of Europe*, as the title of Douglas Murray's popular book goes.

Cette Europe qui était le sommet de la civilisation humaine s'est bel et bien suicidée, en l'espace de quelques décennies», reprit Rediger avec tristesse . . . si la France et l'Allemagne, les deux

nations les plus avancées, les plus civilisées du monde, pouvaient s'abandonner à cette boucherie insensée, alors c'est que l'Europe était morte (*Soumission* 257).

Rediger claims the death of Europe is unavoidable, and has already been set in motion. He accepts its demise and makes the best of it. Its death is coincidental with the decline of Christianity: “sans la chrétienté, les nations européennes n'étaient plus que des corps sans âme - des zombies” (*Soumission* 255). Civilizations, according to Rediger are not killed, but commit suicide (*Soumission* 255). As he ponders the decline of Christianity in the West, which he sees reflected in the bar Métropole in Brussels, Rediger understands that its act of suicide, as he sees it, is incomprehensible to anyone. In an act of defiance towards this perceived suicide, because he loves the former glory of Europe, Rediger converts to Islam. This apparent contradiction between the wish for the introduction of Islamic values into France and the nostalgic love for Christian culture, captures Guénon thought so well, that it is clear that Houellebecq understands the confusing relation between Guénon's concept of tradition and that of civilization. For a traditionalist, the outward structures of different religions are interchangeable.

In *Soumission* Rediger's politics envision the traditionalization of France through Islamic belief. Rediger's diagnosis that the West 'has died' echoes Guénon's normative ideas. *Soumission* fictionalizes a narrative in which a vision of a Guénonian world becomes visible.

A narratological point

Narratology is the study of narrative in which the text is divided primarily between fabula and story. Houellebecq's novels do not often present a willful rearrangement of fabula and story, but do play with their relation. Take for example, the fabula of *Particules* and *Carte*. At the end of *Particules* it is revealed to the reader that the narrative voice does not belong to an external narrator, but a genetically modified human being that, long after the demise of humankind, comments upon the life of Bruno and Michel. In narratological terms, a lot of time is told in relatively few pages. In *Carte*, between the first and second part, there is the obvious switch of focalization between Jed and the policeman that investigates the murder of Houellebecq, which introduces a character that we are very unfamiliar with, alienating the reader even more from the absurd idea that we are reading about the murder of the author we are reading. The story interrupts the fabula again when Jed decides to become a recluse in the French

countryside, emerging suddenly after a leap of ten years to witness the abrupt developments in France's economics that have passed in his absence. In *Soumission* the narrative sequence that I have just discussed, in which Rediger exhibits his ideas and in which the protagonist encounters Rediger, can be contrasted in narratological terms with the preceding part of the novel. When encountered with Rediger in his Parisian dwelling, the protagonist halts the story significantly. In the next forty pages, between page 241 and 283, the story slows down significantly. The reader is confronted with a load of information regarding Rediger's ideological vision for the traditionalization of France. The most interesting narratological attitude of *Soumission* is that it simultaneously provides a lengthy dialogue in which the reader can familiarize themselves with the ideology that has shaped the events of the story they have witnessed within the novel itself. After said dialogue between the protagonist and Rediger, and the dialogue between the protagonist and Rediger's publications, the narrative accelerates again, suddenly events that could bridge several years are told within a few sentences, take for example:

La victoire du Parti musulman de Belgique avait immédiatement été saluée par un message chaleureux de Mohammed Ben Abbas (*Soumission* 278)

Quelques mois plus tard il y aurait la reprise des cours, et bien entendu les étudiantes - jolies, voilées, timides (*Soumission* 299)

The *plus-que-parfait* of the first quote signifies how Rediger's vision is manifesting itself abruptly within the scope of the fabula of *Soumission*, but the reader is not told about the events that occurred in the meantime, resulting in an elliptic narrative. The second quote signifies the lack of resistance to the realization of this politics, and even a willingness of the protagonist to conform himself to Rediger's ideas.

Acceleration

This narratological tendency of Houellebecq's novels to play subtly with the relation between fabula and story, can be approached as a kind of acceleration in the narrative. Acceleration, in my understanding, is a destabilization of narrative, but continues within the boundaries of linearity, it attempts to disclose a vast amount of time passed in the fabula within the story. During these

moments, the narrative often presents a volta, in which a sudden progress of decline is achieved. Houellebecq's novels, upon closer inspection, are rife with these unexpected volta's that imagine the sudden collapse or radical transformation of society; not only in *Particules*, but also for example, *Plateforme* (2001), *La Carte et le territoire* (2010) and *Soumission* (2015), contain an acceleration of narrative in some form or another. Take for example the terrorist attack in *Plateforme*, which functions as a narrative device to drastically alter the end of the novel. Or, in *Carte*, where Jed emerges from his seclusion to find that in his absence, French society has drastically reorganized itself. Also in *Carte* this functions as a sudden volta at the end of the novel.

I suggest that the ambiguous, mysterious way in which Houellebecq's novels convey meaning, that is, for example, his notion that for one the institution of the nuclear family is disappearing, can be related to this narratological phenomenon of acceleration. As Houellebecq's novels depict their criticism of society, for example its representation of modernity, through narrative, it is through these narrative shifts or accelerations that his novels imagine, as a form of fictional experiment, a situation that surpasses reality, so to speak. Further, the willingness of Houellebecq's novels to mold a representation of the future betrays their aporetic relation to history. History, in Houellebecq's literature, is not something that is outside of it, but rather caught within it, held, and imbued with political meanings.

The acceleration present in *Soumission* (2015) is manifested in the democratic victory of president Mohammed Ben-Abbes in the 2022 French elections. After a violent and chaotic interlude that signifies the change of government, in which the protagonist flees Paris, order is restored and Ben-Abbes's policies are beginning to transform French society subtly. The order that is restored seems to have removed the elements, ideas and institutions that characterize modernity. The secular attitude of the Sorbonne has faded, and the family has been given back its former glory as the core of the nation.

Accelerating modernity?

Acceleration is a vital part of the narratology of Houellebecq's novels, it is part of a narrative strategy that seeks to convince the reader of the mimicry of the novels, only to show them later how the

story parts from reality. *Soumission* presents the reader with a traditionalist utopia, and in this sense it fits within the general dialectic of Houellebecq work between tradition and modernity. In my view, Rediger's ideas, that animate the heart of *Soumission*'s fabula, are not to be read as a dystopian representation of Islamization. Rather, the Islamic ideas that are represented in *Soumission* are embedded within Rediger's traditionalism. Through this Guénonian frame, Houellebecq formulates with his fiction another theoretical alternative to supplement his critique of neoliberal capitalism and modernity that can be found in his oeuvre. Modernity in Houellebecq is a period of time that is again and again, from *Particules*, to *Plateforme*, to *Possibilité*, *Carte* to *Soumission*, subverted in the events of the fabula. The events of the novel evoke a dialectic between tradition and modernity that is comparable to the dialectic in Guénon's own work. Alongside his other extensive criticisms of modernity, Houellebecq's portrayal of Guénon's ideas in *Soumission* can be understood as another expression of his criticism of modernity. This criticism is concerned with a lack of tradition in French society and posits the idea that the embracement of Islam could restore that tradition. In this sense, *Soumission* can be read as a Guénonian novel.

How *Soumission* 'accelerates' modernity can be understood as another example of how Houellebecq uses a sort of ventriloquism to criticize modernity. The reader is exposed to the ideas of Rediger and finds no resistance to them in the protagonist. To extend upon his criticism of modernity as general dissimulation of human relations, Houellebecq employs Rediger to voice Guénon's ideas on tradition. Therefore, the intention of the author becomes hard to distinguish, hidden behind narratological structures, this ambiguity is further exemplified by the past future tense of the final sentence of the novel: "Je n'aurais rien à regretter" (Houellebecq *Soumission* 300). The novel of *Soumission* itself is undoubtedly Guénonian, but can we state that Houellebecq himself believes in the idea of tradition as an antidote for French modernity?

How traditionalist is Soumission?

The constant representation of "Eurodéclinisme" (Williams & Sweeney "Le mot déclin" 2) in Houellebecq's work suggests that beneath the Houellebecqian irony lies a genuine political sentiment that is being expressed in his novels, excluding the many personal interviews in which Houellebecq

projects similar anti-European views. Following Williams & Sweeney's 2019 article "le mot déclin est presque trop doux' : Michel Houellebecq's (Euro)déclinisme", which argues that a "Thinning of the literary" (Williams in Sweeney "Le mot decline" 4) in *Soumission* projects Houellebecq's personal political ideas. Houellebecq's criticism of the European Union consists of three pillars, the idea of a collective European suicide: "économique, démographique et surtout spirituel" (Houellebecq in Williams & Sweeney "Le mot déclin" 13). Houellebecq's insistence on a religious decline in European member states is often disregarded because his novels refer to religion (both Christian and Islamic) in ironizing remarks. *Soumission* however brings the issue of a spiritual decline to the fore. As I have stated earlier, the idea that European citizens are losing their faith, is largely fictional. Europe sustains a spiritualism in some form, whether Abrahamic or modern (Habermas 21-22). Whether or not Europe is losing tradition, understood as the Guénonian notion, is another matter. Guénon believes that once a civilization is cut off from traditional institutions, texts, rites, it is bound to destruction. Although the idea of a perennialist truth is alien to Houellebecq's prose, much of Houellebecq's politics, his style of civilization decline, is echoed in the work of Guénon. The story of *Soumission* is undoubtedly influenced by Guénon's ideas. Character Robert Rediger, although not a mouthpiece for the author, is bringing the traditionalist ideas of Guénon into the narrative of *Soumission*. This apparent Guénonianism of *Soumission* should be taken into the context of Houellebecq's general antimodernism, which I have illustrated in the second chapter. Houellebecq's antimodernism has taken on many forms within his oeuvre. Firstly, in *Extension*, we see Houellebecq as an author who is deeply critical on how neoliberal capitalism, since the Thatcher era, has been degrading the authenticity of human relationships. Already in his critique of capitalism, Houellebecq's are not purely anti-capitalist in the sense that they show a concern for a disruption of traditional values, such as the nuclear family and a traditional notion of love and sexual relationships. There is something more to it. As exemplified by Louis Betty, Houellebecq's subsequent novels fictionalize the moral failures of a post-Comtean universe. Again, this alternative to neoliberal capitalism, does not seem like a suitable alternative. In this context, Guénon's appearance, and the implantation of his ideas in to the narrative of the novel (the Islamic transformation of France), can be interpreted as another form of "fictional experiment".

Like how Jed in *Carte* seemed to be unsatisfied with the economic changes of France, François

of *Soumission*, seems to be equally ambiguous in his intention to convert to Islam. Like his failure to commit to Catholicism in the wake of J. K. Huysmans, François' conversion is purely motivated again by materialistic and individualistic needs. Ultimately, François converts to keep his university position and to marry the many brides that Rediger will suit for him. François' inability to commit spiritually to Islam, is the great counterweight to the seriousness of Guénon's presence in *Soumission*.

Still, *Soumission* raises the matter of Islam in Europe as means to amend to the many crisis and problems of European society. Guénonianism, whether serious or not, is a dormant element of the novel. The novel *Soumission* is unique in its representation of Islam in the Guénonian way, and that is, I think, what should be stressed in the representation of Islam in *Soumission*. My Guénonian reading stresses how the representation of Islam in *Soumission* is embedded within the traditionalist notion that any traditional culture, religion, society is to be preferred above a godless modernity. The subtle and mischievous play that Houellebecq enacts with Guénon's ideas I conclude, contains a concerning hint of seriousness, like all forms of play do.

Conclusion

Guénon's idea of tradition projects a form of civilizational decline on Western polities. Tradition can be understood dialectically as opposed to Guénon's concept of modernity. The idea of modernity for Guénon is a historical construct that formulates how the progression of Enlightenment ideas have separated the West from tradition itself. Tradition, furthermore, is a normative concept, and in that sense, possesses a dormant ideological potency.

The representation of modernity in Houellebecq's novels is layered through a chimera-like critique. A reading of his oeuvre reveals that this representation of modernity, its faults, shifts as his oeuvre progresses. From a critique of capitalism that is expressed in his first novel, his later novels are more concerned with "human spiritual yearning" and how Western societies have separated themselves from the sacred, that is, the tradition of the catholic faith. Utopianism, a common topos in Houellebecq's early novels, especially the ideas of Auguste Comte, cannot be found in his later novels. Houellebecq's antimodernism is comparable to Guénon's. They are both critical of the materialism and individualism of Western societies. Both Guénon's theory and Houellebecq's literature share this common dialectic between reaction and progression; or tradition and modernity

The Guénonianism of *Soumission* is voiced through the character of Rediger. *Soumission*'s narrative contains a serious engagement with Guénon's ideas. Through Houellebecq's literature, a fictionalization of Guénon's theory materializes. It presents different worlds in which Guénon's ideas are realized but also ridiculed. In this sense I have attempted to understand Houellebecq's representation of traditionalism in *Soumission*, as an expression of the rejection of modernity that is present throughout Houellebecq's oeuvre. The importance of traditionalism should be regarded within the limits of literary representation. *Soumission* represents a fictionalization of Guénon's ideas, but whether Houellebecq ascribes them, is difficult to pose. There is however a general current of Guénonian influence, especially his rejection of modernity and his idea of the value of tradition, in *Soumission*.

Further research on the relation between Houellebecq's prose, modernity and traditionalism, I suggest, is fruitful. More interdisciplinary research on the relation between Houellebecq and the

ideology of tradition, may provide interesting insights in Houellebecq's literature. How the idea of tradition is nested (and will continue to nest) in contemporary European politics, and how Houellebecq's literature could be seen as a literary para-sphere of that politics, could be the main subject of such a research.

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