Posthuman Nostalgia?

Re-Evaluating Human Emotions in Michel Houellebecq's

La possibilité d'une île

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In Michel Houellebecq's novel *La possibilité d'une île* (translated as *The Possibility of an Island*), the reader is confronted with a bleak future for humanity: the main characters are posthuman creatures who live in secluded compounds and seem incapable of understanding and feeling human emotions. The novel consists of two strands of narrative – the memoir of Daniel1, a comedian living at the beginning of the 21st century, and the commentaries by the clones Daniel24 and Daniel25, his successors in the distant future. Bearing in mind the context of Houellebecq's work as well as the posthuman(ist) discourse, this novel should be understood neither as a straightforward prognosis about the future of human beings nor as an unambiguous evaluation of human cloning. A consideration of certain recurring topics in Houellebecq's works and his stylistic characteristics highlights the specific scenario for the posthuman being developed by Houellebecq. Posthuman(ist) theories on the concept of the human being "after humanism", at the beginning of the 21st century, and its possible future developments help to position the novel's scenario within a wider theoretical context. In this article following, I discuss these contexts in order to analyse what could be called the nostalgic representation of emotions in this novel and the functions of writing and narrative connected to it.

Sexuality and love, desire and ageing bodies are recurring themes in Houellebecq's work. In *Extension de la zone de lutte* (1994) (translated as *Whatever*), for example, he discussed the significance of DNA decoding and the possibility

of making sexuality and sexual reproduction obsolete.[1] His novel *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998) (translated as *Atomised*) also centres on these topics – *La possibilité d'une île* can be seen as a continuation of this discussion: "Beginning where *Atomised* leaves off, *Possibility* ponders at first the problem of sex but it has become clear that it is not sex that is at issue but the difficulty of all human affective attachment and, in particular, love."[2] While the ending of *Les Particules élémentaires* still points out that "there is hope of love", "*The Possibility of an Island* is the death of this hope".[3] Together, the two novels suggest a radical solution to the disenchanted lives under modern capitalism – "the eradication of the hope for affective renewal or regeneration".[4]

But this "eradication" is not obvious at the beginning of *La possibilité d'une île*, as the novel seems to present a continuation of human life through cloning. Apart from the opening pages (which introduce further narrative levels that I am going to discuss in relation to the functions of writing), *La possibilité d'une île* consists of Daniel1's life account, which is presented in alternating chapters with Daniel24's commentary on the account, followed by Daniel25's account – when a clone dies, his or her successor is brought to life. Daniel1 recalls his life as a misanthropic and racist comedian, his failing relationships and how he became a member of the Elohimites, a sect trying to achieve eternal life through cloning. In the distant future, the clones Daniel24 and Daniel25 as well as other clones of Elohimite members live in secluded compounds. The main purpose of the life of each clone is to produce a commentary on their original's account. Towards the end of the narrative, Daniel25 leaves the compound in the vague hope of meeting other clones and finding a community. Discouraged after encounters with a horde of *homo sapiens sapiens* and the death of his dog, he prepares to live out his days and die alone.

Even though the novel seems to present cloning as a solution for the future of mankind, this solution "must be read with some question as to whether it is endorsement or condemnation".[5] Houellebecq's style of writing conveys, as King stresses, a "Swiftian ambiguity".[6] Furthermore, his treatment of philosophical ideas in his novels remains ambiguous: in an article discussing Houellebecq's treatment of Nietzschean philosophy in *La possibilité d'une île*, Moore notes that it is impossible to discern a certain stance towards Nietzsche's theory

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1   Cf. Moraru 2008: 268.

2   Sweeney 2015: 152.

3   Ibid.

4   Ibid.: 153.

5   Ibid.: 163.

6   Cf. King 2006: 63.

of "eternal return", as Houellebecq is "caught between irony and earnest senti-mentality".[7] Therefore, this bleak scenario and the theories and reflections about the future of humanity connected to it should not be understood as unambiguous representations of opinions.[8]

This complex ambiguity is also notable in the novel's treatment of human emotions, especially the discourse about love. Even though Daniel1 is portrayed as a cynic, towards the end of his story it becomes obvious that he mourns the impossibility of finding fulfilling love and nostalgically reflects upon the prob-lem that his concept of love – especially in regard to monogamous relationships – "has become hopelessly outmoded".[9] In the character's opinion, only pets such as his dog Fox are capable of selfless love.[10]

In contrast to Daniel1's nostalgic reflections about love, the clones seem to be unable to understand and feel emotions. Daniel24 and Daniel25 write about their puzzlement concerning human emotions and the role they play for human beings. They are unable to grasp the meaning of emotions and their impact on humans' lives. Daniel25 mentions that he would never know boredom, desire or fear to the same extent as a human being: "Je ne connaîtrais jamais l'ennui, le désir ni la crainte au même degré qu'un être humain."[11] It could even be doubted that these three states all denominate emotions, but as the character puts them in the same enumeration, they appear to belong to the same category for him.

Both clones mostly ascribe emotions to other beings – humans and animals – distancing themselves further from these terms. What is more, "love" appears to be the most enigmatic emotion for the clones, because it contains contradictory meanings, as Daniel25 mentions: "Malgré ma lecture attentive de la narration de Daniel1 je n'avais toujours pas totalement compris ce que les hommes enten-daient par l'*amour* [emphasis in original, S.S.], je n'avais pas saisi l'intégralité de sens multiples, contradictoires qu'ils donnaient à ce terme."[12] He can merely categorize it as a terrifying state and sees it as an important factor in the genetic economy of the species: "Naturellement, je ne pus m'empêcher de méditer une fois de plus sur la passion amoureuse chez les humains, sa terrifiante violence,

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7   Moore 2011: 47.

8   Cf. ibid.: 162-163.

9   Sweeney 2015: 180.

10 Cf. ibid.

11 Houellebecq 2012: 440. "I would never know boredom, desire or fear to the same extent as a human being." Translations, if not otherwise indicated, by S.S.

12 Ibid.: 414. "Even though I read Daniel1's narration attentively, I had never completely understood what humans meant by *love*, I had never fully grasped the multiple and contradictory meanings they connected with this word".

son importance dans l'économie génétique de l'espèce."[13] The clones, who call themselves "néo-humains", see this state of puzzlement as an intermediate phase of posthuman development – a full understanding of human beings and their emotions will lead to the arrival of the so-called "Futurs": "Si nous voulions préparer l'avènement des Futurs nous devions au préalable suivre l'humanité dans ses faiblesses, ses névroses, ses doutes; nous devions les faire entièrement nôtres, afin de les dépasser."[14] The only emotion that they see themselves capable of is sadness, but Daniel24 emphasizes that he experiences only "a slight sadness".[15] In contrast, Daniel25 even differentiates between "desire" and "sentiment" and expresses his doubt that posthuman beings could feel the former, stronger feeling for other beings, when he thinks about a female clone: "Sans aller jusqu'à éprouver pour elle ce que les humains qualifiaient du nom de *désir*, j'ai pu parfois me laisser brièvement entraîner sur la pente du *sentiment* [emphasis in original, S.S.]."[16] This denial of emotions displayed by the clones lessens towards the end of the narrative, when Daniel25 concludes that he has experienced love: "Je savais maintenant avec certitude que j'avais connu l'amour, puisque je connaissais la souffrance."[17] The narrative seems to suggest that the aseptic life in the compounds leaves the clones in an unemotional state, distanced from human experience, and only by leaving their environment do they become capable of experiencing and feeling. Nevertheless, their confined lives are dominated by the obsessive discussion of human emotions, as their reflections and their writings centre on their human predecessors.

How can these characters and the nostalgic reverence to love be interpreted in the posthuman(ist) context? Posthumanism offers theoretical concepts for the possible future of the human being. It positions itself after humanism in the sense that certain premises of humanism are reconsidered, especially the anthropocentric focus and the idea of a human essence. This theory "emerges from a

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13 Ibid.: 435-436. "Naturally, I could not stop myself from meditating once more about the passion of love amongst human beings, its terrible violence, its importance in the genetic economy of the species".

14 Ibid.: 170. "If we wanted to prepare the advent of the Futures, we first had to follow humanity in its weaknesses, its neuroses, its doubts; we had to make them entirely our own in order to surpass them".

15 Ibid.: 157. "Je ne ressens rien d'autre qu'une très légère tristesse".

16 Ibid.: 156. "I would not go so far as to feel for her what the human beings denominated as *desire*, but I could sometimes let myself be driven to the edge of *sentiment*".

17 Ibid.: 432. "Now I knew for certain that I had known love, because I knew suffering".

recognition that 'Man' is not the privileged and protected center"[18] and its proponents discuss the boundaries between human beings and animals as well as the 'natural' and 'cultural' aspects of human beings, and they consider the possible changes of human beings through biotechnological developments such as nanotechnology and cloning.[19] In *La possibilité d'une île*, two aspects can be analysed from a posthumanist perspective: firstly, the depiction of cloning in relation to individuality and the clone as a copy, and secondly, the theoretical connections to affect theories.

In Houellebecq's novel, cloning leads to the abolishment of the individual and posthuman beings are presented as mere copies.[20] Moraru interprets this as the "horrific fate of cloning" as described by Baudrillard, as this development does not lead to the desired immortality of the individual, but erases the individual and makes the human being obsolete.[21] In this solipsistic existence, emotions have ceased to exist, "affection and affects at large are irrelevant because the neohuman cannot be 'affected' by anything other than his genome".[22] Sweeney even describes this state of being as a bodiless existence: "In such a biotechnically managed totality defined by genetic similitude and asexual reproduction, there is no longer any need for the somatic presence of the body or any encounter with other bodies."[23] The idea of overcoming corporeal restraints and extending human existence into cyberspace is precisely what posthumanist theorists – e.g. Hayles in her seminal text *How We Became Posthuman* – criticise as transhumanist dreams about the future. These neglect the centrality of corporeal existence for the human self-image and the human connectedness to other beings such as animals – considerations are central for a multiple, diverse concept of the human being that posthumanists aim at.[24] Therefore, Sweeney criticises Houellebecq's treatment of posthumanism as superficial, since he merely "uses the concept of posthumanism and the science underpinning it as a theoretical strategy with which to probe contemporary society" and "shows, at best, an inconsistent philosophical and ethical engagement with many contemporary theories of posthumanism".[25] The depiction of cloning is centred on the trope of the clone as

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18 Badmington 2011: 374.

19 Cf. Wolfe 2011: xv, Herbrechter 2012: 7-8.

20 Cf. Moraru 2008: 270.

21 Cf. ibid.: 289.

22 Ibid.: 276-277.

23 Sweeney 2015: 154.

24 Cf. Hayles 2008: 2-3.

25 Sweeney 2015: 161.

a copy – a well-researched and discussed literary topic[26] – and does not offer a new perspective. This lack of a new perspective is also evident in the discussion of affect in the novel, which only seems to present a state of "posthuman affect".

Another aspect of the novel that can be considered from a posthumanist perspective is affect. In his essay on "posthuman affect", Vermeulen notes that affect theory can be understood as a posthumanist theoretical approach, since it focuses on impersonal dynamic principles (in contrast to the subjective, personal qualities of emotions), going beyond human experience.[27] According to Vermeulen, affect theorists position themselves institutionally as coming after humanism and in their research, they centre on what precedes human life and experience – characteristics that are shared by posthumanism in general.[28] This development leads to a new emotional scenario that is postulated by affect theory: "[…] the *demise* [emphasis in the original, S.S.] of feeling that posthumanist thought seeks to enact generates second-order feelings that are less easily captured, defined, understood or reterritorialized onto the subject."[29] This, in Vermeulen's view, is connected to the experience of the sublime – but it produces an experience that cannot be reintegrated into human experience.[30] This state of being overwhelmed by emotions and leaving behind the emotional sphere of human beings is postulated at the outset of the novel. But the clones desperately trace human emotions and the final clone, Daniel25, tries to reintegrate and describe feelings in the sphere of human emotions. From the perspective of posthumanist theory, therefore, the novel does not develop a new scenario, but displays a nostalgic reverence to human emotions.

Even though the representation and discussion of emotions does reaffirm the human(ist) paradigm, the ending of the narrative seems to depict the disappearance of mankind, echoing Foucault's famous dictum of mankind disappearing like "a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea".[31] Furthermore, it also seems to suggest that humankind's achievements in art and creativity are irrevocably lost and that all further endeavours in these domains are fruitless. But the functions of writing reflected upon in the structure of the novel and towards the end of the

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26 The clone as a copy and doppelgänger has, e.g. been discussed in: Caduff 2004, Aline 2005.

27 Cf. Vermeulen 2014: 122.

28 Cf. ibid.

29 Ibid.: 123.

30 Cf. ibid.: 123-124.

31 Foucault 1994: 387.

narrative can be interpreted as counterarguments to this death of mankind and its achievements.

Firstly, the importance of writing and written texts and readers are highlighted in the structure of the novel: the text begins with two introductory passages. In the first passage, which is about half a page long, a fictional author is introduced. He explains that a journalist once told him a fable about a man standing in a telephone box after the world has ended. The man is talking incessantly into the receiver, but it remains unclear if he is actually talking to someone else or rambling to himself. The journalist described this as the author's own mode of writing, which prompted the author to address her and other readers directly: "Soyez les bienvenus dans la vie éternelle, mes amis."[32] The second passage cannot be clearly attributed to a specific narrative voice (it could be interpreted as the last utterings of Daniel23, as the voice describes its failing consciousness and oncoming death). In this passage, too, readers are openly addressed, seemingly not specifically normal human beings, as they are addressed as "dead or alive" – which might mean "virtual or real".[33] These metaphorical hints at the ambiguous state of the text's addressees only appear at the beginning of the text and they are not commented on within the text. While explicitly invited into the text, the readers are also warned about the content, as the sentence "fear my words" appears twice within this introductory passage.[34] This confusion of narrative voices and the direct address of the readers foreground the fictional character of the text.

Secondly, towards the end of the novel, there are two metatextual passages about emotions in literature. In the first, Daniel25 is prompted to leave his compound after he has read the last poem of Daniel1 and dreamt about an island where love, not only sexuality, is possible – King interprets this scene as a clear sign of Houellebecq's "humanistic nostalgia for what society is losing".[35] But the scene also points to the influence of literature as an emotional trigger that prompts a reaction in the posthuman character. The second passage happens on his journey, when Daniel25 finds a message in a bottle from another clone with a page from a paperback attached to it. He recognizes it as an excerpt from Plato's *Symposium*. In the short passage, Aristophanes explains his concept of love. There is no explanation as to why this excerpt was chosen as an uncommented message or why Daniel25 would recognize it. Inserting this passage in the narra-

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32 Houellebecq 2012: 9. "Welcome to eternal life, my friends".

33 Ibid.: 19. "Je ne souhaite pas vous tenir en dehors de ce livre; vous êtes, vivants ou morts, des lecteurs".

34 Ibid.: 17, 20. "Craignez ma parole".

35 King 2006: 63.

tive seems to hint at literature's valence for preserving and conveying human emotions across centuries and beyond the existence of the human being, even though Daniel25 leaves the message behind and comments on its outdatedness. But it can also be understood as a critique of the philosophical tradition that understands love as a transcending movement beyond the longing for the material object. Daniel25 sees this movement as the central fallacy in the development of human culture in the 20th century, as King points out: "Tied into this fallacy was the trans- and postsomatic character of the culture humans fostered in their attempt to 'get over' the body in philosophy, the arts, social arrangements and so forth."[36]

All in all, the discussion and representation of emotions within *La possibilité d'une île* is paradoxical: leaving behind the human sphere of emotion and moving into the sphere of posthuman affect seems to be impossible for the posthuman characters. This is highlighted through the depiction of the clones as copies and through their use of human techniques, since they continue to use writing as a tool for observation and reflection and retrace their predecessors' thoughts in their own writing. In their nostalgic longing to return to human emotions they condemn humans for their movement towards a posthuman development. Therefore, on the one hand, on the content level the representation of emotion in literature and the arts is criticised as a fatal idealization of transcending the human body and mindset. On the other hand, the novel contains several signals that highlight the fictional character of the text, making the reader aware that he or she is reading a critique about the possibilities of novels in the form of a novel – without being offered an alternative. The nostalgic insistence on human emotions within the narrative does not offer alternative scenarios for the (posthuman) future, but emphasizes that even though certain aspects of human life such as emotions might vanish, they continue to play an important role in the reflection about and the understanding of the human being.

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36 Ibid.

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