

## From Literature's Vulnerable Place

Nicholas Hauck

"While I stood in all those places, I understood that I was standing in still another place."

-Gerard Munane, *Stream System*

Michel Houellebecq's latest novel *Sérotonine* (2019) fails. Consider *La Carte et le Territoire* (2010) which deservedly, or methodically, won the Goncourt prize. Deservedly, de facto; methodically, as some have suggested—convincingly—because Houellebecq set out to write *a Goncourt winning novel* (let's leave for another time what that implies). Whether or not this is true is impossible to determine, and the politics of literary prizes are beyond me (and of little interest). I do believe that *La Carte et le Territoire* deserved to win the Goncourt; I'm also partial to the idea that Houellebecq crafted a text with the prize in mind. Since the Goncourt is awarded for outstanding and imaginative prose, good thing MB crossed that off of his list when he did, because *Sérotonine* is neither.

Even considered alongside his penultimate novel *Soumission* (2015), *Sérotonine* slumps. *Soumission* is both diagnosis and prophecy; those familiar with Houellebecq's work know that the opinions of both doctors and prognosticators are derided, yet *Soumission* touched a (pinched) nerve within La Hexagone and sparked overdue, repressed dialogues. There is an attempt at critiquing European bureaucracy and 21<sup>st</sup> century neo-liberal France in *Sérotonine*, but it seems to remain at the level of disinterested commentary, dissociated. Houellebecq's previous novels provoked, for better or for worse. In his latest, mundanity reigns.

So why bother writing about it? Because, to paraphrase what someone smart once said about the unremarkable, *Sérotonine* plants an inconspicuously venomous houellebecqian thorn in one's side, uninteresting enough to cause mild insomnia. If *La Carte et le Territoire* was written in to win the Goncourt and *Soumission* is a reactionary critique flavoured with underhanded vanity, *Sérotonine* is what's left: defeatism. Even the novel's literary references—Barbey d'Aurevilly, Thomas Disch, Karl Marx, La Rochefoucauld, Theodor Fontane, Maurice Blanchot, Emil Cioran—are derivative, vacuous; there's no nostalgia here, tradition is a corked empty bottle of wine, and regret and sentimentality have killed themselves off.

It would help to give a summary. The novel is narrated by the main character, Florent-Claude Labrouste, a forty-six-year-old agricultural engineer who makes a good living working contracts for the EU. His partner, Yuzu, is a disaffected 20-year-old Japanese woman. The two are not intimate at all and, as Florent learns from videos discovered on her laptop, Yuzu is the preferred star of group sex and bestiality parties on the exclusive Île Saint-Louis. When Florent reads about

the phenomenon of deliberate disappearance, he takes action and prepares to erase himself: sells his condo, makes the necessary financial arrangements, cuts off all social ties (they are few), and moves into a characterless mid-range chain hotel. During this time, Florent increasingly self-medicates with the anti-depressant Captorix (higher doses and frequency). The only actual decision Florent makes while on Captorix is the one to erase himself.

Two other events (it would be an overstatement to call them decisions) are worth noting. Florent visits his old college roommate, a back-to-roots farmer who has inherited both land and ideals from his aristocratic lineage. His is a character that provides a stunning reverse double to Florent's: hopeful, active, grounded, a minor Icarus.

Then Florent seeks out his first (and perhaps only) love. He finds her, living with her young son in a remote cabin. The encounter remains distanced, unfulfilled, unilateral. Once again, Florent, as well as Houellebecq's novelistic space, are stamped with inaction, mundane save for a brief near-death moment that acts as *mise en abyme* of non-events.

\*\*\*

In a June 2019 lecture at UBC in Vancouver, Bruno Blanckeman describes contemporary (French) literature as a vulnerable space, afraid of its own "death," and characterized by formal mutations and new practices. Contrary to popular discourse—I'm thinking here of self-proclaimed *literati* who fetishize and feed on mourning, and self-pitying intellectuals—Blanckeman suggests that literature is not disappearing but decentralizing, de- and then re-territorializing itself in indeterminate ways. It's on the move, fleeing the tyrannical iconosphere. While a certain kind of literature may be disappearing—namely the myth of literature as the centre of culture—a vulnerable one has emerged. Literature's new space is unstable; the links and relations it establishes are necessarily ephemeral. Yet from its very own vulnerability, literature draws its energy and creativity, avoiding the hermetic by forming vague, unfastened connections with everyday life. For Blanckeman, Houellebecq partakes because he writes to break off from literary empathy, leaving a pock-marked unnavigable rhetoric in his wake.

Houellebecq and vulnerability aren't the only boys in town. In Gerard Munane's work one reads that "almost anything was possible except, of course, the actual" (*Land Deal*). Recall that *The Possibility of An Island* (2005), Houellebecq's fourth novel, explores immortality in the face of human-scale desperation; as an indirect response to *possibility*, Munane is drawn to the "earnest undertaking by... writers to shape their sentences not according to habits of thinking in their own day but as though each writer is writing from a separate island just short of the notional beginning

of the mainland" (*Stone Quarry*). From this actual space of vulnerability, where the to/from of time is tweaked, literature becomes possible.

So perhaps, from a not-so-distant point on a clear day, one can recognize that *Sérotonine* is methodically botched, a failure as reaction, and the deserved product of a culture sustained and distracted by anti-depressants... while also playing the lead role in the success story of literary self-medication.