

*civil* in matters such as inheritance and divorce, where law is inseparable from *les mœurs* and where, therefore, ‘le droit imprègne la vie’ (165). Particularly interesting are the chapters that follow on the ways in which legality and illegality affect the careers of Chabert (the implications of whose reappearance are only inadequately covered by the law) and the marquis d’Espard in *L’Interdiction*, where, as the lawyer Popinot shows, the workings of the law fail to coincide with justice. In succeeding chapters the emphasis is again on the difficulties of combining legality and justice, whether through the somewhat ambivalent if valuable role of the *juge de paix* or through arguments for and against the death penalty: politics sways punishments (or non-punishments) in *Une ténébreuse affaire*; Tascheron is executed in *Le Curé de village* but the arguably equally criminal Vautrin becomes Chief of Police at the end of *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*. Although Balzac is fascinated by executions, he shows that the implementation of the death penalty can be both arbitrary and unable to repair injustices committed. After the chapter on Peytel—which again shows Balzac vainly fighting against the harshness and probable injustice of capital punishment—a chapter on *Le Lys dans la vallée* demonstrates how not just the law but justice itself can be problematic: in *Le Lys*, as in other texts such as *La Femme de trente ans* which invoke “le doigt de Dieu”, justice, whether human or divine, seems as inequitable as it is inescapable: ‘Ainsi, non seulement Dieu n’assure pas la police du monde, mais sa justice, quand elle s’exerce, apparaît cruelle, disproportion-

née, inhumaine’ (329). Since the idea of justice is, like the law in *Chabert*, neither clear nor universal (338), Balzac emerges as a perceptive analyst both of legal technicalities and of their implications for philosophy, politics and ethics.

In the following sections Lichtlé moves on to aspects of Balzac’s ideas of politics and modern government as they develop in relation, notably, to the English ‘revolution’. Balzac’s ambivalent portrayal of Cromwell in *Cromwell*, and his seeming endorsement of a constitutional monarchy supported by a strong second chamber, give the lie to any assumption that Balzac was just a reactionary: in politics and ethics, as in matters of the law, Balzac is unfailingly reflective and critical. As Françoise Mélonio notes in her preface: ‘le roman est l’antidote à l’hégémonie du droit’ (13). A detailed analysis of Louis Lambert as a (failed) mystic, and an examination of the reception of *Le Père Goriot* between 1912 and 1960, close this meticulously researched, finely argued, beautifully produced book.

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**Michel Houellebecq: *Humanity and its Aftermath***

DOUGLAS MORREY

Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2013  
212 pages, £70.00, ISBN: 978 1846318610

Not many people would be prepared to take on the task of writing a book on

Michel Houellebecq, the author of novels that tend to be remembered for the many notorious and salacious episodes that populate their pages. Often treated as promoting a boorishly unpalatable misogyny, indulging a prurient fascination for the obscene, celebrating the ejaculatory, reinforcing a pornographic imagination that is aimed at arousing the heterosexual male reader, and reaching for the familiar images of a casual Islamophobia, Houellebecq has roundly—and frequently—been condemned for providing succour to those who would happily sweep away the gains made in the name of sexual equality and social justice. Douglas Morrey is prepared to take on the task of reading and, more importantly, re-reading these dimensions of Houellebecq's novels, not in an attempt to defend Houellebecq, but to consider a more complex sense of the contemporary than is admitted by those who see his work as lacking in literary merit or without any redeeming social or ethical qualities. Indeed, one of the strengths of Morrey's book is that, without excuse or apology, and with scrupulous attention to the subtleties, contradictions and multiple voices that shape both Houellebecq's public personality and his writing, it treats the concerns and language of Houellebecq's fictional and non-fictional writing as 'plucked from the ambient discourses circulating in our society' (84–5).

A substantial part of Morrey's book is given over to documenting the various controversies that Houellebecq's fiction has generated, and it both openly admits that his novels cannot escape the misogyny of the tropes that they so insistently restage ('In Houellebecq's novels ...

women are blamed and women are punished' [18]), and agrees that Houellebecq's writing offers an 'angry critique of feminism and feminists themselves' (20). But Morrey situates this anger and these tropes within the broader sense of disgust and disavowal that he identifies in Houellebecq's novels, finding in them something more than the self-indulgent musings of an objectionable misanthrope or merely a contrarian disavowal of the old, the ugly or the foreign. Emphasising what he describes as the 'ethnographic' dimensions of this fiction, Morrey makes a compelling case for Houellebecq the satirist and social critic, a writer who despairs at socio-sexual life today and charts its many tragedies—sex tourism in the context of economic globalisation, 'the agonizing experience of sexlessness' (34), the hardening of individualism, the compulsion to define selfhood in a culture that constantly emphasises sex and sexuality, the decline of the family, 'a deep anxiety about organic matter' (17) and the status of the ageing body in western societies. Throughout, though not continually, Morrey turns to the concept of the posthuman in order to think about what might otherwise be seen as Houellebecq's lack of humanity. This concept allows Morrey, in the early sections of his book, to consider features of Houellebecq's writing that might not typically be thought of as posthuman, such as the blankness of its style ('narrative voice frequently refuses to identify with the human' [41]), or the social and political consequences of its focus on the animalistic irrationalism that motivates human behaviour (Houellebecq's work 'suggests that human behaviour arises out of a complex, but

nonetheless entirely determined, set of causes that include evolutionary instincts, physical, genetic and neurobiological constraints, cultural norms and infant socialization' [63]). In the final chapter, the idea of the posthuman returns more forcefully, and in terms of a more recognisable literary topos, when Morrey considers Houellebecq's utopian novel *La Possibilité d'une île*. Here, we read, readers are offered the image of a society in which desire—indeed, touch itself—has been eliminated by the selective adaptation of DNA that cloning allows, but Houellebecq's novel denies the familiar comforts or discomforts of speculative realism by reflecting on 'the *spasm* undergone by thought in the effort to think the posthuman, to think beyond the conditions of its own existence' (141).

Divided into three principal chapters—'Sex and Politics', 'Work and Leisure' and 'Science and Religion'—which each take particular texts as their focus—*Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *Les Particules élémentaires*, *Plateforme* and *La Carte et la territoire*, and *H.P. Lovecraft, Rester vivant* and *La Possibilité d'une île* respectively—Morrey's book is shaped by substantial scholarship and guided by a deep understanding of the literary and social contexts to which Houellebecq should be connected. What results is a careful, attentive and (most importantly) responsible study, one that responds to the many provocations of Houellebecq's writing.

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**Art and Visual Culture on the French Riviera, 1956–1971: The École de Nice**

ROSEMARY O'NEILL

Aldershot, Ashgate, 2012

282 pages, £65.00, ISBN: 978 0754664710

In this well-researched, comprehensive and generously illustrated study, Rosemary O'Neill opens a window onto the multifarious talents and creations of several groups of artists who worked together mainly on the French Riviera in the period 1956–1971. Under the École de Nice umbrella O'Neill brings together the Nouveaux Réalistes (Yves Klein, Arman and Martial Raysse), Fluxus (Ben, Robert Filliou and George Brecht) and Supports/Surfaces (Claude Viallat, Noël Dolla). Conceptualism, play, experimentation with everyday objects, space and place are explored as the elements binding together these diverse artists and the 15-year coverage runs from Klein's first monochrome shows to the split between Parisian and Niçois members of the Supports/Surfaces group during an exhibition at Nice's Théâtre Municipal. This study captures particularly well the ways in which the artists involved responded to the official cultural and tourist agenda of Nice and its environs, following the high-profile work of Matisse, Picasso and Cocteau earlier in the 1950s and during a period of the opening of the Matisse and Léger museums and exhibitions of the work of Chagall and Dufy.

Moreover, O'Neill successfully reconfigures an approach to the everyday, to the readymade and to recreation that can be located between the transformative ambition of modernism and the critical

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