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The Art of Incarnation: Loss and Return of Religion in Houellebecq's *Submission*

Christiane Kruse

Embodiment and pretence

The publication of Michel Houellebecq's novel *Soumission* (*Submission*) in France – as well as in Germany and Italy in translation – sparked a torrent of controversy in Europe with its plotline. In the year 2022, a French coalition government is led by a charismatic Muslim named Muhammad Ben Abbes. Reality eclipsed this provocative fiction only hours after the novel's release on 7 January 2015: Islamic State militants launched their deadly terror attack on the editorial offices of the *Charlie Hebdo* satirical magazine in Paris.

In Houellebecq's novel, Ben Abbes, as the new president of France, pursues humanitarian ideals and a measured, culturally conservative Islamism that permits polygamy and suppresses women's emancipation. He staffs every educational institution in the country with Muslim converts. One of them, Robert Rediger, becomes president of the Sorbonne, now financed by one of the royals of a Gulf state. The protagonist and narrator, François, loses his tenure as a professor of literature. The Islamist government, while appearing tolerant towards the laity and people of other faiths, still pursues a restructuring of society according to Islamic moral values. This triggers a fictitious internal conflict that nevertheless compels the reader to contemplate the real consequences of the Enlightenment, the history of the Western world, and the loss of metaphysics and humanist ideals.

Submission can be categorized as a classic *Entwicklungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel. Since his youth, François has stumbled from one crisis to another in a futile search for cultural identity, the central theme of the book. For his sole subject of literary research, he has chosen the writer Joris-Karl Huysmans, whose works of the Decadent movement provide a historical backdrop to address the concept that the loss of metaphysics, represented by Christendom, is to blame for the decline of the Western world in modern times.

In a conversation towards the end of the novel, not long after the Sorbonne has changed hands, Robert Rediger, the new head of the institution, tries to persuade François to resume teaching as a Muslim convert. He asserts atheism has no solid

basis in the West. Strictly speaking, Rediger says, there are very few ‘true atheists’; rather, there are those who, like Dostoyevsky’s Kirilov, pass themselves off as atheists and humanists and ‘[...] reject God because they wanted to put man in his place. They were humanists, with lofty ideas about human liberty, human dignity’ (Houellebecq 2015: 209). Considering the unfathomable creation and beauty of the universe, Rediger concludes there is no reason to doubt the existence of God. Not a single scientist from Newton to Einstein could have been an atheist, he goes on, because ‘the universe obviously bears the hallmarks of intelligent design, that it’s clearly the manifestation of some gigantic mind’. Sooner or later, these assertions would be reintroduced, since the intellectual debate of the twentieth century could be summed up as a battle between communism – that is, ‘hard humanism – and liberal democracy, the soft version’. Thus ‘the return of religion’ should be inevitable (Houellebecq 2015: 212). And yet, in the novel, no return to Christendom is in the offing because it has done little more in the past century than deal with its own downfall and that of its once-rich culture. *Submission*’s premise is that the era of the Decadent Movement in the late nineteenth century comes to an end in the twenty-first and thus that only a conversion to Islam can deliver redemption. Upon reading Rediger’s book, *Ten Questions Concerning Islam*, which is full of photographs of Islamic art, François quickly finds convincing reasons to convert, which, until then, had been missing for him. François then becomes a Muslim, but whether France can forge a new cultural identity in moderate Islam is a question left open.

In the course of their conversation, the narrator comes to the realization that he can’t really justify his own atheism. To claim there is no God would be ‘pretentious’, which Rediger affirms with conviction. ‘That’s the word. At the end of the day, there’s something incredibly proud and arrogant about atheist humanism. Even the Christian idea of incarnation is laughably pretentious. God turned Himself into a man [...]’ (Houellebecq 2015: 211). This is the theme explored in my chapter. In the following pages, I will summarize the art theory and practice of depicting skin in painting to explain how the dystopia of *Submission* could arise and to highlight the role of art in this process.

Embodiment and the depiction of flesh in painting

During Italy’s early humanism period around 1400, *incarnazione* became a strong metaphor in painting (Kruse 2003: 175–224). Cennino Cennini introduced the central chapter of his *Il Libro dell’arte* with ‘the method and system for working on the wall, that is, in fresco; and painting and doing the flesh [*incarnare*] for a youthful face’ (Cennini 2015: 100). Cennini described a painting technique he called incarnation (*incarnazione*) as a successor to hand positions required for painting a human face on a wall in the fresco technique (Figure 15.1).

In the end, the reader – in those days, the student of painting – would be capable of applying this method. The English term incarnate for the painting of flesh in art arose from Cennini’s *incarnazione* technique. ‘And do a sensible amount of it,’ he wrote, ‘because you have to complete one head of a young female or male saint like

Figure 15.1 Giotto: *Adoration of the Magi*, detail: head of the Virgin Mary, fresco, 1304–6, Padova, Scrovegni Chapel. Giuseppe Basile (ed.), *Gli affreschi della Capella degli Scrovegni a Padova*, Milan: Skira, 2002, p. 185.

Our Most Divine Lady in one day' (Cennini 2015: 101). He then explained how to mix pigments and how to sketch. In conclusion, he wrote: 'And go sensitively over the whole face and the hands where there has to be flesh colour [*dove ha a essere incarnazione*] in the same way' (Cennini 2015: 101). Cennini referred to the process of painting skin as *incarnazione*, which requires three different jars of pale pink pigment. The purpose of the colour gradation is the three-dimensional appearance of the human face, to which Cennini applied the term relief (*rilievo*). Cennini wanted to use the human face as an example to explain how to treat the surface of a picture with a specific technique of colour application to render a human face on a wall surface.

Cennini assigned a central concept of theology to his art theory. It is commonly conceived that the history of the dogma of embodiment started in the Prologus of the Gospel according to St. John (1.14), where it is stated 'that the logos (Christ) became flesh'. Presumably, it was Irenaeus, the Greek Catholic theologian, who first coined this Theologoumenon into a single noun: *sarkosis* (flesh-becoming), declaring that salvation in the sense of participation in divine immortality is only possible through the incarnation of God (Michel 1923: 1446–85; Lanczkowski 1982: 368–82). The new terminology quickly gained importance in the liturgy of the celebration of the Eucharist and was used in the formulation of faith ever since the Council of Nicaea. In the same vein, the Roman Catholic Church adopted the term *incarnatio* und *incarnari* (become flesh) through the translation of Irenaeus's commentary in the Eucharist liturgy.

The incarnation of the Word of God in the Gospel According to St. John designates the humanization of God in the person of Jesus. According to classical Christian theology, what had been the Word of God in the Old Testament became flesh and blood in the New Testament, namely Christ. The 'verb-ization' of *incarnari* designates incarnation as a process of transformation – that of words into flesh – which also signifies a change in substance with the material difference between word and flesh. Incarnation also means the invisible presence of God made visible through the person of Jesus. Theologians throughout time have agreed that incarnation is a mystery, something supernatural that no human mind can truly comprehend, hence the incarnation of God in the form of Christ as one of the great foundations of Christian teachings.

***Incarnazione* as a medial process**

The synthesis revealed in the above-mentioned theological contexts, formulated from *incarnazione* as a meta-pictorial metaphor, is one of the building blocks of Western art. Cennini used the term in multiple meanings as a way of redefining the process of painting icons on a wall. The first part of the medial process described in the procedure of fresco painting is the transfer of liquid, amorphous colour substance in solid form from icons of significance that are only readable once they are fixed to a surface. This ushered in the successive emergence of icons on walls that were once blank. The artistic creation (*creatio*) complements the divine in that it recreates what God was said to have set in motion. This is why *Il Libro dell'arte* begins with the creation story of Genesis. We can also speak of an epiphany of iconic signs, which illuminates their intended analogy to the incarnation of logos and their emergence in the world.

The process of drawing Cennini described as a painting technique could be learned because it's an *arte* – a craft – that anyone could undertake with enough practice and skill. Cennini interpreted *incarnazione* as a modern painting technique that joins the traditional understanding of theological incarnation as one of the great mysteries of Christian faith to a concept of art. In this sense, Cennini's meaning of *incarnazione* is personification; that is, the coming-into-being of a bodily image on a surface that has the appearance of a natural human figure. He referred to the illusion of three-dimensionality adopted by the viewer as *rilievo* (relief). Painting, he wrote, was *imitatio naturae* (imitation of nature, or *mimesis* in Greek), which, as he repeatedly explained, had been practised in painting since Giotto. Cennini designates *incarnazione*, or personification in the sense of the likeness of a human body in an image, as *ritrarre del naturale* (to take out of nature). Because the painting technique lends the images in icons a similarity relation to the living things and objects they depict, they have a mimetic, illusionistic quality. The significance of *incarnazione*, therefore, lies in the iconicity of the pictorial representation. That is what differentiates them from the non-representational characters theologians use to convey the mystery of faith; they bear no apparent resemblance to what they depict.

By the beginning of the fifteenth century, the mimetic-illusionistic image concept whose technique Cennini spelt out in his treatise permeated all European painting. Numerous Renaissance painters displayed embodiment in their work

(Kruse 2003: 225–68), among them the legendary Lukas, the first Christian painter, who produced – that is, embodied – a picture of the Madonna (Figure 15.2). In the following pages I will outline the further development of the theory and practice of *incarnazione*, along with the ensuing expulsion of Christian theology from matters of art in the modern period.

In the mid-sixteenth century, Giorgio Vasari wrote this description of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*: 'The mouth with its opening, and with its ends united by the red of the lips to the flesh tints of the face [*l'incarnazione del viso*], appeared, indeed, to be not colours but flesh' (Vasari 1903, 35; Bohde 2007: 56). The theology-tinged term is not used in the context of a religious painting, but in a description of the iconic image of Lisa del Giocondo, a Florentine entrepreneur whose portrait Vasari probably never saw with his own eyes. *L'incarnazione del viso* characterizes the life-like sheen of the painting materials that have the effect of human flesh. Vasari's artist biographies

Figure 15.2 Raphael (workshop): *Saint Luke painting the Madonna and Child*, oil on wood, Rome, Academy of Saint Luke. Andreas Henning (ed.), *Die Sixtinische Madonna. Raffaels Kultbild wird 500*, Munich, London and New York: Prestel, 2012, p. 167.

mention this term only eleven more times. In the seventeenth century, Gian Pietro Bellori refers to the unique nature of the painting as *incarnazione*. In this sense, Caravaggio freed paints from their effects of make-up and vanity and returned their 'blood and flesh' tones (*il sangue, e l'incarnazione*) for which the vitality and genuine nature in figural depiction is intended (Koos 2007: 66). Art theory of the early modern period thus combined incarnation theology, painting techniques and materials, vitality and the creation of works in a new constellation that metaphorically redefined art.

Flesh and the soul

French art theory of the seventeenth century marked the first break in the history of embodiment in art. Allusion to theological dogma was avoided; in the painting of flesh, the emphasis was on *carnation* and *chair* (flesh), such as in the work of Roger de Piles (Fend 2007: 87–8). The *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* of 1694 defines incarnation exclusively as the theological embodiment of Jesus, while *incarnat*, according to Cennini, refers to any colour that resembles human skin: 'A type of the colour red that is similar to living flesh' (*Espèce de couleur rouge, qui ressemble à celle de la chair vivre*) (Fend 2007: 100, note 1). There's a reason for this differentiation: the painting of flesh and the colour of flesh were now considered modern among art scholars who debated the supremacy of the antiquities over the modernism in the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*. Roger de Piles considered Rubens the painter who was masterful at seducing and deceiving the viewer: the more convincing the visual deception, the greater the artist (Fend 2007: 89). This amounted to a sharp demarcation between reality and image, between real and iconic presence – in which art comprised a pretence of reality.

Now the focus turned to the emotions whose intimations are visible in the skin. In the early seventeenth century, the discovery of the principle of blood circulation spurred painters' interest in medical research that would explain the correlation between physiology and emotions. In his observation of Rubens's *Andromeda*, Roger de Piles noted the presence of fear when blood has appeared to drain away from the extremities, turning the skin pale. Rubens adopted a depiction of skin that would render the passions of the soul visible. Complexion became a metaphor for the 'soul of painting' because 'the soul is the final consummation of the living, and that which gives one life' (*L'âme de la peinture est le coloris. L'âme est la dernière perfection du vivant, & ce qui lui donne la vie*) (De Piles 1677: 138). This signalled a defeat of the argument against proponents of *dessin* (drawing) and the antiquities. On the other hand stood the notion that human beings possess something divine, the eternal soul – thus the advent of depicting flesh in painting. The basic issue was – as with Cennini – deriving a painting technique for iconic presence. A metaphysical concept of the art of painting nevertheless grew out of a purely physical-technical concept of depicting flesh in pictures. Through the use of colour, painting, if only in appearance, rendered the invisible visible – namely, the soul that animates the flesh. As de Piles comments on Rubens's *Drunk Silenus*, the appearance of the living compels the viewer to easily imagine they could feel the warmth of blood if they put out their hand (*qu'on s' imagine facilement que si l'on y portait la main on sentirait la chaleur du sang*) (De Piles 1677: 89). In this sense, the art of painting became an intermediary between physiology and metaphysics.

Around the mid-sixteenth century, Counter-Reformation theologians decried the portrayal of naked flesh in painting because of its potential to arouse lust in anyone who viewed it (Hecht 2012: 336–43). Despite the movement's strict morals, a theory of art promoting the depiction of flesh in paintings helped to legitimize it during the seventeenth century.

Diderot and the 'Nervous Canvas'

In the eighteenth century, interest in art theory shifted to the sensitive subject of skin. In the *Encyclopédie* by Jean le Rond d'Alembert and Denis Diderot, physicians such as Henri Fouquet referred to *sensibilité* in his definition of skin as a sensitive organ, a nervous canvas (*toile nerveuse*) (Fend 2007: 93; Benthien 2002: 120–1). In his *Notes on Painting*, Diderot defended his 'truth of nature' against the Academy's scholarly 'study of the écorché' whose 'gestures, postures, and figures are false, forced, ridiculous, and cold' (Diderot 1995: 194). Instead of a pilgrimage to the Louvre, artists were instructed to observe everyday life in narrow streets and alleys to 'get the right ideas' about what to paint. As a result, study at the Academy patterned after Diderot had another concept. 'Children, adults, mature men, old men, subjects of all ages, of both sexes, [should be] drawn from all walks of life. [...] After the drawing sessions a trained anatomist would explain the écorché to my student, with constant references to the living, animated nude body' (Diderot 1995: 196). Then comes the paint itself: 'Someone with a vivid sense of colour fixes his eyes on the canvas; his mouth hangs open, he paints; his palette is the very image of chaos. It's into this chaos that he dips his brush, pulling from it the stuff of creation [...]' (Diderot 1995: 197).

A report followed to list everything the painter had captured: birds, flowers, trees and animals. Finally, 'he sits down again, and you see him give birth to flesh [...]' (Diderot 1995: 197). That is Diderot's own creation story. A godlike genius was at work, incarnated, as well as a bold character allowed to display his every mood. And the most difficult for him to grapple with was flesh:

It's an interaction of red and blue which is all but imperceptible; it's blood, life, the very despair of the colorist. He who developed a feeling for the flesh has taken a great step forward; the rest is nothing in comparison. Thousands of painters have died without acquiring a feeling for flesh, and there will be thousands more who'll die without acquiring it. (Diderot 1995: 199)

The range of emotions unleashed despair among the colourists: as the models posed during sittings, their rush of different thoughts brought about changing feelings that manifested in their skin tone:

Because I picture Grimm or my Sophie, and my heart beats fast, tenderness and serenity becoming visible on my features; joy is released through my every pore, my heart dilates, my small sanguinary reservoirs are set vibrating and the barely perceptible color of the fluid thus activated augments the bloom and life of my

flesh. [...] what a torment for them, then, is the human visage, this canvas that becomes excited, animated, flushed, or pale, that expands or contracts in tandem with the infinite multitude of alternatives sustained by this light, fleet expiration we call the soul? (Diderot 1995: 201)

The importance of theology waned as the Enlightenment took the science of physiology to embodiment. The soul materialized in a double sense – both physiologically and in painting.

Flesh without soul

In the first half of the eighteenth century, the French royalty's renunciation of religious painting, which resulted from the desacralization and demystification of King Louis XV's absolute monarchy, had a fundamental impact on French art criticism. The Catholic Church's crackdown on Jansenist theology had resulted in the spread of Jansenism across all levels of society, while the Jesuit order had been banned by royal edict in 1764. These two developments brought about a collapse of the alliance between the Church and the crown and are seen as the causes of the waning significance of the Catholic religion as well as the ungodliness of the Enlightenment (Schieder 1997). From then on, there was a decline in art commissions with religious content, not least because of a lack of funds in religious institutions. Religion-themed paintings found favour predominantly among private collectors, if at all, because of their artistic value. When the Marquis de Véri ordered a pendant as a companion piece to *The Adoration of the Kings*, a painting by Fragonard, it was '[to prove] his genius with a peculiar contrast, an exuberant, passionate painting known as *Le Verrou*' (Schieder 1997: 201). *The Lock*, which depicts a lover trapping his paramour in a bedroom, as well as *The Adoration of the Kings*, corresponded to the advanced assessment of art that followed the 'downfall of the sacred genre hierarchies' called for by the French Art Academy director, Jean-François de Troy, who said a genre painting should hang next to a history-themed painting (Schieder 1997: 201–3). Jean-François Marmontel, in his *Memoires*, noted a secularized approach to religious painting regarding the work of François Boucher (Figure 15.3): 'He did not see the Graces in a good place; he painted Venuses and the Madonna like the nymphs of the coulisses; and both his language and his pictures bore the stamp of his models' manners and the tone of his studio' (Schieder 2006: 61).

Diderot complained about Boucher's portrayal of the Virgin Mary, who, like the prostitutes and angels in his paintings, resembled indecent satyrs. The painting motifs that provoked offence in the Counter-Reformation movement were adored by Salon visitors and detested by the clergy, especially renderings of Maria Magdalena, with their voluptuous curves and abundant display of flesh.

The Madonna with make-up

The portrayal of skin played a significant role in painting and was a prominent artistic criterion (Koos 2014: 195–214). Diderot found fault with Boucher's embodiment of

Figure 15.3 François Boucher: *Rest on the Flight to Egypt*, 1737, oil on canvas, St. Petersburg, The Hermitage Museum. Alastair Laing (ed.), *François Boucher 1703–70*, Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1986, p. 279. cat. no. 68.

make-up, which the artist painted both on the faces and on the derrières of his nude models, and recommended the observation of nature as a remedy (Démoris 2006: 201–2). If the painter were to follow his fantasies nonetheless, that would be *faux* (false) and *manière* (manner). As to the arousal of sexual desires inspired by paintings of unclothed women, art critics sometimes adopted the moral stance of the clergy as though it were their own. Given the naked feet, hips, breasts and derrières depicted in Carle van Loo's *Bathers*, Diderot commented in the Salon of 1759 that people would sooner be drawn to their own vices than to the painter's talent. Étienne La Font de Saint-Yenne, the founder of the publication on art critique, similarly remarked that paintings should touch the soul and not the senses (Démoris 2006: 203). For critics, art during the reign of Louis XIV showed the scale – with Boucher's work the pinnacle – of the modern period's decadence, in which the extensive use of pale pink (*rosé*) for the colour of (white) skin demonstrated the main symptom of the period's demise (Figure 15.3): 'That is now the general complexion of almost everything we produce in literature and in painting: everything is rose-coloured and lasts no longer than the rose' (Démoris 2006: 203). Make-up became a synonym for the court with its wealthy upstarts, especially for the king's mistresses. In 1759, before the Salon's publication of the painting *Madonna and Child with the Young St. John the Baptist*, which Madame de Pompadour had commissioned from Boucher, an anonymous art critic made this comment:

[...] the demeanour of the Madonna is neither modest nor decent, but coy and sensual. I wonder what is the difference between this figure and dancers; with the exception of make-up, which is not applied in a hideously thick layer on her face, I see no difference at all; and yet, the rest of the painting is not spared of this colour. (Wine 2002: 25)

Whoever read this probably knew that Madame de Pompadour was an amateur singer and dancer prior to her rise to the aristocracy, and thus took a closer look at the picture. The art criticism of the Enlightenment around 1750 was considerably distanced from the once religiously motivated, theologically legitimated embodiment paintings.

Banishing the soul

Following the Enlightenment, the technique of depicting skin and flesh in painting was based on the latest discoveries in the field of medicine. Flesh was now understood to be a tissue composed of muscle, fat, lymphatic and blood vessels, skin and the epidermis. As modern histology heralded the beginning of tissue differentiation, artists expanded their knowledge of the skin and underlying flesh with treatises such as *The Anatomy of the External Forms of the Human Body* (*Anatomie des formes extérieures du corps humain*) (Paris 1829). The publication provided artists with a deeper understanding of the skin as a membrane between outer appearance and internal physiology.

At the same time, the influence of positivism, with its scientific regard of the human body, advanced the concept of portraying skin in paintings in accordance with French art theory and practice in the nineteenth century. As such, what transpired was not merely the expulsion of incarnation theology from the depiction of flesh in painting, for which positivism and its founder Auguste Comte had paved the way. In his earlier work, *The Course in Positive Philosophy* (1830–42), Comte formulated his 'law of three stages' based on the intellectual and social development of the individual and of humanity according to laws and processes spanning three stages: the theological or fictitious stage of childhood, the metaphysical or abstract stage of youth, and the scientific or positive stage of adulthood (Kruse 2008: 28–39; Lepenies 2010). Together they comprise the path of the human spirit to its perfection.

The first theological or fictitious stage was marked by an inquiry into the nature of existence, whereby humankind created otherworldly deities in hopes of attaining a certainty of faith not found on earth. Next, in the metaphysical or abstract stage, humankind tried to make sense of the world without drawing on otherworldly entities. But still present was the question: 'Why are we here?' Only when this question is relinquished [...] can humanity finally be explored to the fullest – the positive nature functional relationships – without looking for ultimate causes (Lepenies 2010: 22).

By combining empirical observation with logical thinking, humanity is able to infer the constancy of relationships among phenomena according to natural laws. Going by this evolutionary history of humanity, Comte followed a ranking of the sciences, which he formulated in his *Encyclopedic Law*. This brought the natural sciences to a sequence according to their increasing complexity: mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology and finally sociology as a science of the highest complexity.

In Comte's perception, theology was incompatible with progress, while metaphysics was incapable of contributing to societal stabilization. Instead, he asserted, positivism could accommodate both progress and order. Wolf Lepenies considered 1844, when Clotilde de Vaux, Comte's 'great, albeit unfulfilled love' died, a turning point in the philosopher's thinking: 'In Positivism, feelings now have their place; art assumed an equal role alongside science, and the positivist movement became a religion with strict dogmas, precise rituals and a strong drive for conversion, which the religion's founder hopes to impart to his disciples' (Lepenies 2010: 23–4). From 1851 on, positivism became a 'religion of humanity' a 'religion without God, in which humanity took the place of a supreme being'. According to Comte, 'While the Protestants and Deists always attacked religion in the name of God, we, on the contrary, must ultimately abolish God in the name of religion' (Lepenies 2010: 25). This brings to mind a famous quotation supposedly by the pathologist Rudolf Virchow: 'I have dissected thousands of corpses, but nowhere have I have found a soul.'

The depiction of skin in painting as social criticism according to Zola

Émile Zola's literature and art criticism, which is categorized under the canon of naturalism, associated the depiction of skin and flesh in painting with the sociopolitical and scientific discourses of positivism. Matthias Krüger explains how Zola's anti-aristocratic, anti-bourgeois stance was reflected in the embodiment painting of his time and attests to his 'basic anti-metaphysical premise' that corresponds to the positivist world view of Auguste Comte (Krüger 2007: 175). In Zola's art critique, the smooth, silky skin of ladies of the aristocracy is mirrored in the smooth surfaces of the pictures, which he scorned as a symbol of a decadent academic Salon painting. Parisian society was in fact divided over the choice of paintbrush with which to portray it. Instead of a fine badger hairbrush (*blaireau*) that lent a glossy, powder puff-like surface to anaemic-looking ladies' portraits in the style of Alexandre Cabanel, Zola asked painters to use the rough bristle brush (*brosse*), which leaves traces in the colour substance and emphasizes the painting materials to achieve 'a brutal tableau, treated with an ingenious harshness' (*un tableau brutal, traité avec les rudesses du génie*) that reveals 'the flesh and blood of the painter' (*la chair et le sang du peintres*) (Zola 1959: 173 and 97).

By contrast, the painting style of the Salon painter, criticized as sleekly anaemic, reduced a subject to a 'pomaded and putrid carcass' (*cadavres pommadé et fleuri*). Cabanel's famous painting *La Naissance de Vénus* (Figure 15.4) is for Zola 'une lorette' (a floozy), but not one of flesh and bones – that would be indecent – rather of a sort of pinkish-white marzipan' (Zola 1959: 111). Art critics, among them Joris-Karl Huysmans, came up with absurd metaphors to vilify academic painting: 'take Venus, just a badly blown-up *baudruche* [a type of rubber balloon sold at fairgrounds] from head to toe. No muscles, no nerves, no blood' (*Prenez la Vénus de la tête aux pieds, c'est une baudruche mal gonflée. Ni muscles, ni nerfs, ni sang*) (Huysmans 1969: 19).

Figure 15.4 Alexandre Cabanel: *The Birth of Venus*, 1863, oil on canvas, Paris, Musée d'Orsay. Michel Laclotte (ed.), *La peinture à Orsay*, Paris: Edition Scala, 1986, p. 25.

Figure 15.5 Edouard Manet: *Olympia*, 1863, oil on canvas, Paris, Musée d'Orsay. Françoise Cachin (ed.), *Manet 1832–63*, Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1983, p. 177.

As Zola explained in the example of Manet's *Olympia*, which caused a scandal in his Salon of 1865 (Figure 15.5), the portrayal of skin in painting was in demand. For a true depiction of life, literati and artists alike had to 'penetrate the flesh' (*pénétrer dans les chairs*), because 'the view from the operating theatre is revolting for anyone who has no love for the austere truth' (*la vue d'une sale amphithéâtre est au contraire écœurants pour ceux qui n'ont pas l'amour austère de la vérité*) (Zola 1979a: 326). The painter

had roughened the originally smooth surface of the picture with a bristle brush so the strokes were visible and the skin attained a consistently grooved appearance. For Zola, the truth resided not in the brain, but in the flesh. In his novel, *Thérèse Raquin*, he explored a 'curious case of physiology' the way a surgeon would dismember living human beings.

Zola pursues the subjects of his research, like Manet, with 'brutal and ingenious coarseness'. They are 'supremely controlled by their nerves and blood' (*souverainements dominés par leurs nerfs et leur sang*), 'devoid of free will' (*dépourvus de libre arbitre*); they 'are human brutes, nothing more' (*sont des brutes humains, rien de plus*) (Zola 1979: 24). They are subject to 'dull passions, instinctive urges, and the confusion of the brain as a result of a mental breakdown' (*le travail sourd de passions, les poussées de l'instinct, les détraquements cérébraux survenus à la suite d'une crise nerveuse*) (Zola 1979: 24). Zola's characters who commit murder out of lovers' passion have no 'higher existence [...] there is no presence of a soul whatsoever: [...] I wanted it that way' (Zola 1979: 24). Whoever wants to discover the 'mechanism of life' (*mécanisme de la vie*) should not be beguiled with the superficiality of beautiful skin, but rather embrace the crude facts of human nature with scientific ethos. Part of the physical constitution of a human being is a 'temperament' (*tempérament*), governed by blood and nerves, which is responsible for one's moral thinking and behaviour.

The loss and revival of religion

This brings us back to the opening premise of Michel Houellebecq's novel, *Submission*, which presents the loss of metaphysics as the loss of Christianity. The character François is researching Joris-Karl Huysmans, who, like Émile Zola, Huysmans's older contemporary, adhered to positivism, a philosophy that promised progress through science by pitting metaphysical speculation against empirical, logical reasoning. Émile Littré, a follower of August Comte, predicted that the physiology of the brain would ultimately subjugate a metaphysical world view and thus vanquish every religion. Understanding the workings of the brain meant reducing theology and metaphysics to their physiological principles. According to Zola's physiological art theory, an artwork is not an expression of the mind, but a product of the body: 'like all things, art is a product of human beings, a human secretion; our bodies sweat the beauty of our works' (*Comme tout chose, l'art est un produit humain, une sécrétion humaine; c'est notre corps qui sue la beauté de nos œuvres*) (Zola 1959: 83). Hence his reaction to Manet's Olympia: 'I affirm that this canvas is truly the flesh and blood of the painter and that he will never produce such a work again' (*Je prétends que cette toile est véritablement la chair et le sang du peintre, et que jamais il ne la réfère*) (Zola 1959: 97).

But the human spirit cannot be expelled from matters of art that easily. On the contrary, art has been raised to the level of a god that demands everything from its disciples. In Zola's novel *The Masterpiece* (*L'Œuvre*), the painter, Claude, consumes his artwork, unable to bring it to completion. He grows insane and hangs himself in front of the painting for which his wife had posed as a model for months of agonizing sittings, observing ' [...] how he made her legs the gilded columns of a temple and her body a blaze of red and yellow, a star, magnificent, unearthly. Nudity thus enshrined

and set in precious stones, demanding to be worshipped, was more than Christine could tolerate' (Zola 1993: 342). The painting that Claude produced in the spirit of modernism leaves him in a state of social isolation and poverty. But art is still his only true religion. He sacrifices his son, his wife and himself to godly art in the devout belief that his works will not only outlive him; they will achieve eternity.

Back to François, Houellebecq's protagonist, and Huysmans, his real-life research subject, whose body of work was also influenced by the naturalism of his era. *Against Nature* (*A Rebours*), Huysmans's novel published in 1884 and a theme of *Submission*, was supposed to be a naturalistic work styled after Zola. Today it's considered the 'Bible of Decadence'. Huysmans's main character, Jean Floressas Des Esseintes, is a neurotic aristocrat who flees from reality into rural exile, where he creates an artificial, mystical world filled with intoxicating sensory stimulation that drives him to the edge of mental derangement. In the end, he believes only faith in the kingdom of God will redeem him. The book concludes with a short prayer: 'O Lord, pity the Christian who doubts, the sceptic who would believe, the convict of life embarking alone in the night, under a sky no longer illumined by the consoling beacons of ancient faith' (Huysmans 2008: 181). The hereafter becomes his salvation from a godless reality.

Submission as defence against decadence

In Houellebecq's novel, François traces Huysmans's path through the Decadence movement and his conversion to Catholicism. He enters the monastery where Huysmans had looked for meaning in his life but couldn't find it. François then makes his way to Rocamadour, one of the most important places of Christian pilgrimage in France. In the chapel of Notre-Dame, he thinks 'again of Huysmans, of the sufferings and doubts of his conversion, and of his desperate desire to be part of a religion' (Houellebecq 2015, 138–9). In Rocamadour, he gazes at the cult statue of the Black Madonna:

It was something mysterious, priestly and royal that surpassed Péguy's understanding, to say nothing of Huysmans. [...] She had sovereignty, she had power, but little by little, I felt myself losing touch, I felt her moving away from me in space and across the centuries while I sat there in my pew, shrivelled and puny. After half an hour, I got up, fully deserted by the Spirit, reduced to my damaged, perishable body, and sadly descended the stairs that led to the car park. (Houellebecq 2015: 139)

In *Submission*, François, as an intellectual, appears almost victimized by the Enlightenment in a secularized, Western world, where ritual objects that once bore religious significance were now merely valued for their aesthetics. His search for God is fruitless, even in the church, which now stands as a mere remnant of a fallen culture – at least to those who came of age with the teachings of the Enlightenment.

The moderate Islam now embraced by the members of the Sorbonne in the novel fills them with the spirit of a new godliness that holds a realm of physical pleasure in store. Unwilling to relinquish their Western-liberal mindset, they devote themselves to

overindulgence of Middle Eastern delicacies, exquisite French wine and – following Islamic tradition – polygamy. *Submission* serves up a swan song of Western civilization as an elegy and laments what remains of its sensual beauty, which François has pursued in the course of his literary research and now exists only in his memory. His very identity is steeped in his knowledge of civilization as far back as the Middle Ages. The melancholy engulfing François over this sense of loss corresponds with his lack of personal relationships and the emptiness of sexual escapades which the author describes in pornographic terms. Nadia, a Muslim, escort and Diderot student, ‘was sexually conscientious’. Instead of the intimacy of human touch, François experiences merely an array of orifices.

As science advances further into the cosmos to discover the origins of the universe, it provides proof of God without searching for it. In a conversation with François, Robert Rediger, the president of the Sorbonne in Houellebecq’s novel, justifies a return to religion in the twentieth century by quoting Einstein, who said, ‘God doesn’t play dice.’ Humanism, communism, fascism and liberalism are all self-convinced expressions of atheism, he says, that have left European nations ‘bodies without souls’. Rediger concludes: ‘That Europe, which was the summit of human civilization, committed suicide in a matter of decades’ (Houellebecq 2015: 214). Only a few characters in *Submission* advance this root cause analysis and see it reflected in globalization and the country’s national and colonial legacies, as well as in the political apathy of a population that does not feel represented by its leaders but perceives only the abstract power machinations of political parties. France’s leadership by an Islamic government is presented as an almost logical consequence and collateral damage of this development, because the author continually introduces cunning new arguments to suggest how this could happen.

In conclusion, Houellebecq delivers a pronouncement whose words are uttered by the president of the university. Robert Rediger has fulfilled his dream to inhabit the house where Dominique Aury wrote *Story of O*, which he finds a ‘fascinating book’ because of its grandiose yet simple premise: ‘that the summit of human happiness resides in the most absolute submission. [...] For me there’s a connection between woman’s submission to man, as it’s described in the *Story of O*, and the Islamic idea of man’s submission to God’ (Houellebecq 2015: 217). As for the Koran: ‘What is the Koran, really, but one long mystical poem of praise? [...] for the Creator, and of submission to His laws’ (Houellebecq 2015: 217–18). The author’s anthropological humanism discovers the self in the other and reveals the inherent and structural equality of religions and cultures. The question of which culture dominates the other depends on political power and its agents.

And yet the novel’s message for adherents to advanced Western civilization, with its achievements in art, literature, music and science, is not a cynical one: even in the face of decline, ‘Judeo-Christian’ culture still thrives amid diversity, beauty and abundance. It is reflected above all in its effect on people who both staked their faith in it and forged their identity in its past treasures. Only literature – and this is the self-referencing message of *Submission* – is still capable of giving voice to human and divine spirit in the very face of its loss.