

Valentina Fenga

Tallinn Univerity

Being Human:

Eternal Life and Post-humanity in Michel Houellebecq's *La possibilité d'une île*

Au moment où une hôtesse annonçait l'embarquement du vol pour Madrid, je me dis que cette île au climat tempéré, égal, où l'ensoleillement et la température ne connaissent tout au long de l'année que de variations minimales, était bien l'endroit idéal pour accéder à la vie éternelle.¹

In this paper about *La possibilité d'une île* (*The Possibility of an Island*) by Michel Houellebecq, it will be discussed the elaboration, proposed in the novel, of a classic science fiction and dystopian literature theme: the cloning of human beings as a controversial way to reach eternal life (*la vie éternelle*); a topic that will be investigated from the point of view of its implication with the fascinating and complex issue of the definition of human identity and the role of memory and time (time, considered as a constitutive element of human identity, both past, present and future of individuals and as existence in a determinate moment) in it.

The island, in this perspective, becomes a very multifaceted element: both metaphor of human condition but also a *Crono-Topos*, a possibility of the existence of a particular space in a determined time, a sort of utopian tension that both is created by humanity and defines humanity, we will see later on, how.

Before arriving to any conclusion, in fact, when having to consider such an "irreverent" narrative as Houellebecq's one, it is necessary to overcome many questions raised among literary critics and readers and the fervid debate born around his writings, considered on the one

¹ M. Houellebecq, *La possibilité d'une île* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), p. 309.

hand a trivial commercial product and on the other an exceptionally sharp analysis of contemporary world. The reason of this disagreement is undoubtedly concerning urgent topics such as biotechnological and technological development and their influence on human beings and feelings, tackled the author that are still in search for a definition from a philosophical, epistemological, ethical, anthropological point of view. *La possibilité d'une île* is dense with irreverent and radical thoughts, that risk at any time to make the reader take the fictional narrator's unpopular ideas for those of the real writer. In some points it can be irritating or embarrassing with its explicit scenes of sex, or even surprising when uneven truths are revealed right in the middle of a sarcastic and sharp speech about racism or women. Houellebecq's cynical and disillusioned eye is looking straight at contemporary world and at this open debate, certainly unveiling hidden desires, fears and paranoia commonly shared by Western Societies, and he is trying to redraw a picture of it, as if it was taken in a distant future time, with that taste of nostalgia for a irrecoverable past, even if it was a divided age, even if it was a densely lone time.

It is the theme itself of the novel to be challenging: mankind has obtained eternal life through cloning a certain number of human beings, after a catastrophe. The so called Neo-Humans have eliminated any kind of psychological and physical suffering; they communicate thanks to a system similar to Internet and instant messaging, they avoid any sexual practice. They spend their lives waiting for "the Futures", a perfect form of humanity that will recuperate emotions without suffering, but it is not clear how. They spend their lives reading "life histories" of their predecessors, especially the original human from which they derive, leading a "contemplative life" waiting for a new form of humanity that will reintegrate emotions, depurated from any negative feeling. Around these areas of numb wellbeing some colonies of humans, in a degenerated form, a sort of *primates*, with violent and primitive behaviors, continue a species bound to sufferance, ignorance, involution. One day, after having been in contact with other two female clones (Marie 23 and Esther 31), the clone David 25 decides to leave and look for what is left of humanity in the outside world. David 25,

the main narrator, is the clone number 25 of Daniel, a comic actor, who lives a dissipated life, cynical and disillusioned, characterized by and anxiety of living and who left a sample of his DNA to the Elohim community, a sect believing in the possibility of eternal life through cloning².

In the utopian and dystopian literary tradition the island³ is usually a physical, geographical space far away from the main land, where an ideal or degenerated society is placed. This topographical connotation (Utopia is a “no-where”) is evident in the etymology itself of the term “Utopia⁴” and it is not difficult to understand why the island becomes a privileged setting in this genre. But the island is not just the ideal location, but also in Pezzini’s words: “A radical sign of alterity in opposition to the known territories and to the places and conflicts normally experienced and lived⁵.” The place of “otherness” then, a space, to continue with Pezzini’s words “always hyper-codified, hyper-signifying, in one word symbolic”⁶. For this reason each element of the island is not just ornamental but functional to the message that the text wants to convey and thus usually described with particularities, mapped⁷ carefully where each modulation and character of the space is relevant.

The first strong manipulation that Houellebecq novel proposes in the utopian or dystopian genre is in its conception of island. This setting is

² Even From this simple summary of the plot, we can anyway understand that the novel has evident connections to classic anti-utopia/dystopian literature theme, and in particular to Huxley’s *Brave New World*. This intertextuality, has started with *Les Particules élémentaires*, and even is not going to be one of the topic of this article, is definitely a fascinating reading that deserve a closer look.

³ A. Corrado, “L’isola”, in V. Fortunati, R. Trousson, A. Corrado (a cura di) *Dall’Utopia all’Utopismo, percorsi tematici* (Napoli: CUEN, 2003), pp. 243-255.

⁴ U-topos=non topos, the word was created by Thomas More in the foundation text “Utopia” for a precise history of the term see H.G. Funke, *Il termine utopia attraverso i secoli*, *Ibidem*, pp. 17-44.

⁵ I. Pezzini “Geografia”, *Ibidem*, p. 240.

⁶ “[...] sempre ipercodificato, ipersignificante, in una parola “simbolico” Pezzini I. Pezzini “Geografia”, *Ibidem*, p. 240.

⁷ For this idea of mapping the territory in Utopias see chapter “Geografia e mappe nell’itinerario utopico”, *Ibidem*.

present just in the narration of Daniel 1, the human, and it is not a distant unknown place but the real Lanzarote island, the location chosen by the Heloim sect for their community with futuristic architecture and new age environments, the place where the cloning experiments started.

Au moment où une hôtesse annonçait l'embarquement du vol pour Madrid, je me dis que cette île au climat tempéré, égal, où l'ensoleillement et la température ne connaissent tout au long de l'année que de variations minimales, était bien l'endroit idéal pour accéder à la vie éternelle. (p. 309)

As shown in the passage which is the more explicit reference to the island as “the utopian place for eternal life”, in the novel, the island is still very real, it is a space still deeply connected to contemporary reality. It is reached by journalists and televisions interested in the sect, it is a tourist attraction even if it maintains that aura of eternity due to the perfect climate rendering a certain sense of stillness of time. Houellebecq seems to empty that “hyper-signifying space” to make it real, known, unveiled and, what is more important, he associates this space to the past. The island is in fact the setting of the part of the novel regarding the life of Daniel 1, the human being from which all the others derive, he lives in a time that could be the contemporary world, but that according to the temporal setting of the novel (the age of clones) is the past. The island then, is just present in the narration of Daniel 1 and totally absent, as a geographical element, in the other narrations. The island as a real space, is not going to exist in “the future” (i.e. the future age of the clones). Daniel 25 has to walk months to arrive to the sea, that has more the aspect of big salted pools than the one of the ocean. We assist to a process of removal of the real space of Lanzarote, that is substituted with a metaphorical presence, not even an utopian place, but, as the title suggests, a “possible” space existing somewhere, a possible “utopia” in time. From a real location to a metaphorical element in the poetry of Daniel 1, discovered by Daniel 25, the island in Houellebecq's fiction becomes a «lieu dans le temps», “a place in time”, a knot in which metaphorical elements and philosophical questions converge. All this needs to be disentangled, revealed, the island is the central opaque element in Houellebecq novel, that is present and absent at the

same time and whose definition overstep the boundaries of space and time to arrive to the definition of the essence of humanity itself.

First of all we need to pay attention to the temporal setting of the novel. *The possibility of an island*, is articulated into 3 different temporal moments or levels:

1. The time of Daniel 1 – The original human being – his life history, his autobiography. – The chronological period could be our times, or maybe, according to the author, the world within 10 years.
2. The time of Daniel 24 – Some indefinite moment in a distant future. The clone n.24 reads and comment Daniel 1's life.
3. The time of Daniel 25 – The clone n.25 reads and comments his predecessors, and decides to leave his home and try to reach humans.

Evidently, time overlapping is one of the main peculiarity of the novel, interested in presenting different points of view belonging to different temporal levels simultaneously.

Nowadays point of view, “the present” both for Daniel 1 and the reader, have a predominant part in the novel, this fact may induce to think that the purpose of such a narrative choice, is just presenting a satire of contemporary world, with the old device of showing what will happen in the future, as it is the typical structure of anti-utopia. The intention of satirizing is of course evident: reading the life of Daniel 1, we can easily catch his acid and disenchanted words about love, sex, women, religion, science, nevertheless it seems that the three different temporal settings suggest the intention of creating a very interesting effect in the novel.

The continuous shifting of time, between present and future, and the juxtaposition of different temporal phases create an atmosphere of stasis, eternity and stillness, an expanded present that becomes future or past, it depends on the point of view of the narrator – Daniel 1 representing the present for the reader and the past for the clones; Daniel 24-25 representing the future but the present of narrative diegesis:

Identique à Daniel 24, je sais que j'aurais en Daniel 26 un successeur équivalent: les souvenirs limités, avouables, que nous gardons d'existence au contours

identiques, n'ont nullement la prégnance nécessaire pour que la fiction individuelle puisse y prendre appui. [...]Rejetant le paradigme incomplet de la forme, nous aspirons à rejoindre l'univers des potentialités innombrables. Refermant la parenthèse du devenir, nous sommes dès à présent entrés dans un états de stase illimité, indéfini.⁸

This stasis corresponds, in the novel, to the representation of eternity, acquired through cloning and the passage of memory, that we could call, quoting Dali's famous painting, the "persistence of memory", from the original human being to the following clones. Life history and thus the personal memory is what, together with science, can guarantee eternal life; the idea is quite simple, to keep the identity of the original human being and render him eternal, it is necessary to preserve the memory of what he was and what he has done in life.

According to Pierce rules – a fictional philosopher mentioned in the novel, not to be mistaken with the American philosopher Peirce – personality is identified with memory. An individuality cannot exist without a memory. Autobiography has been chosen as a way of passing the memory of the original human personality because it is a form that allows recreating a complete picture, a *vision d'ensemble* of life.

The autobiographical fiction is a narrative choice that emphasizes a very important aspect of the novel: memory and autobiography are a way of constructing the self through its fictional representation and they are not just something remembered from the past but also, as it is stressed in many studies on the subject⁹ (Siegel D. J. *La mente relazionale, neurologia dell'esperienza* 2001, B. Schettini, *Le memorie*

⁸ "Being the same of Daniel 24, I know that Daniel 26 will be an equivalent successor; limited and confessable memories that we have of our existences, that have the same shape, have not the power necessary to impress our own individual imagination. [...]Rejecting the incomplete paradigms of the form, we tend to join the universe of innumerable potentialities. Having closed the parenthesis of becoming, we have entered already a state of unlimited stasis, indefinable". M. Houellebecq, *La possibilité d'une île, op. cit.*, p. 426.

⁹ D.J., Siegel, *La mente relazionale*, Cortina, Milano, 2001; B. Schettini (a cura di), *Le memorie dell'uomo: il lavoro narrativo della mente fra retrospettiva, prospettiva e autobiografia* (Milano: Guerini studio, 2004).

dell'uomo, 2004) it's a series of processes according to which the past experience influences the future. In this case the self constructed by Daniel 1 from his autobiography and also the influence that his memory is having on the future, acquire a wider meaning since it is going to be the "model-self" to be maintained in the clones. Personal memory becomes in fact the memory of the community of clones of the same individual, his past will be the community past. Being formed with the same genetic material, clones are a biological replica but have also a unique personal history. This apparently perfect process, this way of continuing the life of the individual forever, present a very serious danger: loosing the sense of the original memories with the passing of time.

étant génétiquement issu de Daniel 1, j'ai bien entendu les mêmes traits, le même visage; mais cette subite distorsion expressive, accompagné de gloussements caractéristiques, qu'il appelait le *rire*, il m'est impossible de l'imiter, il m'est même impossible d'imaginer le mécanisme. Les notes de mes prédécesseurs, de Daniel 2 à Daniel 23 témoignent en gros de la même incompréhension. Daniel 2 et Daniel 3 s'affirment encore capable de reproduire le phénomène, sous l'influence de certaines liqueurs; mais pour Daniel 4, déjà, il s'agit d'une réalité inaccessible. Plusieurs travaux ont été produits sur la disparition du rire chez les néo-humains; tous s'accordent à reconnaître qu'elle fut rapide. Une évolution analogue, quoique plus lente, a pu être observé pour les larmes, autre trait caractéristique de l'espèce humaine.

Clones have what we could call a "second-degree memory" that is supposed to define their identity, the same identity of the human, but that instead put a distance between them and the original subject. They can arrive to try to put together the pieces through someone else's words, but this seems to be not enough.

Using Bodei's notion of the *dejà-vu*¹⁰ as the crystallisation of the mutating being, as the coming back of the past in the shape of the present, we could affirm that clones' memory is a succession of *dejà-vu*, considering the chain of clones as "one" life perpetrated forever;

¹⁰ R. Bodei, *Piramidi di tempo Storia e teoria del déjà vu* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006).

all their moves and all their thoughts are just a repetition *ad libitum* of something already done, already said.

They are trapped in a time that is not the present but an expanded past, and they live waiting a future era to come, to rescue them. Personal memory is for them a mythology, in the sense of continuous repetition of stories about someone who is lost in the past.

The narrative choice of *Life histories*¹¹ is functional to the representation of the loss of the power of memory to construct an identity as we have seen in the quotations; the link between the human and the clone become increasingly weak with the passing of time, so that, in the end the original human becomes just a presence, a sort of ghost with acts and feelings that are vanished.

Clones have not an individual past, and the mythological one they are referring to is far too distant to construct a unique identity.

Houellebecq's novel seems to suggest that Memory for clones is, at the end, not a means of identity but an imposition of a simulated life. The clones simulate, can only arrive to have an idea, an impression of life, but they don't belong to that past, they don't actually have and identity.

These reflections on the use of life history and fictional autobiography in *The possibility of an island* shows the operation that the writer does on the dystopian-anti-utopian form: the dystopian dimension of the novel of Houellebecq is shifting from external world to individual reality. There is not a totalitarian regime that wants to reduce human beings to an indistinct mass, it is on the contrary the individual who have no more personal past, no more personal memory. Houellebecq changes the space of the traditional dystopia, from the outside world, the oppressive state, to a very personal, interior space. Individuals are defeated in their uniqueness; eternal life is more similar to damnation than to reward.

The question asked at the beginning of the novel "*who, among you, deserves eternal life?*" sounds, at this point, more like a challenge-menace than like a moral invitation to reflect on one's own behavior.

¹¹ life histories

Moreover, after what we have seen, the very question is maybe: what kind of eternal life is it? What is the price of eternal life?

Any moral implication for gaining eternal life, is in fact totally absent from *The possibility of an island*. Houellebecq deprives religion and spirituality of the privilege of deciding about what life is, revising totally the notion of merit and moral reward for eternity that is implied in the main religions. The exemplary human being that has obtained eternal life is not an *exemplum* of morality and rightness; he is cynical and atheist.

Eternity becomes a very human question¹², concept taken out of the realm of transcendence to be almost violently pushed into immanence. Once having lost the faith in God, it is science and technology to get a predominant part in the possibility of living forever. Humanity is seen in terms of object to be manipulated, modified. This secular eternity is acquired through biogenetics, the replication of DNA, that create someone that could continue, with the same biological material the life of his/her predecessor forever.

The body, so vividly represented in the narration of Daniel 1, symbol of caducity, of aging, of decadence but also source of pleasure and happiness, loses its uniqueness through cloning and is transformed in the simulacrum of eternity. The sameness from a biological point of view, the same genetic complement, is the guarantee of endlessness.

In *The possibility of an island* biogenetics have finally reached the state of the art and the body becomes more and more the simulacrum of eternity. The body, to use Caronia's expression in *Il corpo virtuale*¹³, is a "disseminated" body not in a virtual reality as he suggests in his essay, but in this case we elaborate his expression to refer to a disseminated

¹² "Avendo perso la fiducia nell'aldilà e quindi con la perdita di speranza nella vita eterna promessa dalla fede, l'uomo occidentale ha iniziato a sognare l'immortalità terrena seppur disincantata, ibridata tecnologicamente", in R. Marchesini, *Post-human: verso nuovi modelli di esistenza* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002), p. 483.

¹³ A. Caronia, *Il corpo virtuale: dal corpo robotizzato al corpo disseminato nelle reti* (Padova: F. Muzzio, 1996).

"It was the nostalgia of the desire, the will to feel again, to be irradiated again by such a powerful force, just like their ancestors." M. Houellebecq, *La possibilité d'une île*, *op. cit.*, p. 425.

body in *Space and Time*. Expanding the theories of technology as an extension of men, here we have the final hybridizing of *bios* and *techné*, to the very deep molecular level. Even the soul in Houellebecq's perspective becomes a part of the body, something inscribed in the chromosome material and, for this reason, replicable.

Despite the lack of identity that the passing of time has caused, there is anyway something resisting, a residue of humanity that has passed through cloning.

Both Daniel 24 Daniel 25 and Mary 23 (of whom we ignore the predecessor) are post-humans that present a sort of anomaly: reading the life histories they develop a decisive feeling that is very human and force them to abandon their standard destiny to look for something more: nostalgia.

C'était la nostalgie du désir, l'envie de l'éprouver à nouveau, d'être irradiées comme leurs lointaines ancêtres par cette force qui paraissait si puissant.¹⁴

They feel the nostalgia for those men and women so far away in the past, they feel the nostalgia of having their own individualities, singularities, memories, of linking a singular and unique *Byos* to a singular and unique *Psiche*. They are not able to explain nor to understand this feeling, that is more like a tension, a desire to act, to travel, to see what is beyond their lonely existences. Is this very human feeling of nostalgia that makes clones look more human. The trace of this acquiring a feeling is signaled in the writing by an elliptic narration and most of all by their writing in the form of blank verse; they recuperate a poetical dimension, that was supposed to be completely absent in their commentary.

And in the end it is maybe this nostalgia for loving that lead them in the quest of the essence of humanity and that links inexorably Marie 23 and Daniel 25 to their original humans, this quest for the possibility of happiness and of love, that also Daniel 1, despite his cynicism and disillusion has unconsciously hoped for throughout his life.

¹⁴ M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (1927) *Being and Time*, translated by Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

It is just for this reason that Marie 23 decides to leave her flat, the only space where she was supposed to live forever waiting for the “Futures” to arrive, to look for remains of humanity in her, and it is the poetry that Daniel 1 wrote to his lover Esther, before committing suicide, that brings Daniel 25 on the road to the old places where Daniel 1 used to live.

Starting their voyages, they willingly decide to put an end to “eternity”: in fact the dynasty of those who leave is considered extinct, and the process of cloning is interrupted.

In the society of Daniel 1, and in our society, the process of removing any reference to death leads humans to create continuously new barriers between healthy livings and dying or dead persons. There is an entire sanitary system and a complex series of procedure to alienate the end of life from life. Despite this fear is causing a real process of removal of death from everyday life, according to Stephen J. Gould (1989) being conscious of mortality is the result of the biological and neuronal complexity of humans that is absent in other species. He talks about biological damnation of humans that cannot live without the awareness of being bound to die. In other words it is death that better defines human condition; it is inevitably the hidden face of life, and eternity itself has a sense because is the definitive elimination of caducity, to the inevitable end, the final solution to existence.

Restoring death is the definitive step that neo-humans take towards humanity.

We could affirm that here, the Heideggerian theory of “Being for the death” appears to be particularly illuminating. In *Sein und Zeit*¹⁵ paragraph 61, this finality, this choice of choosing of being conscious of the death is a necessary part of existence. This conception of death does not lead to a refusal of life, or suicide, but instead in being conscious of it, human being consider his existence as a “possibility of being” a possibility of living.

¹⁵ “Happyyness was not a possible horizon. The world was a betrayal. My body belonged to me for a short period of time; I will never reach the assigned goal. The future was empty. It was the mountain” M. Houellebecq, *La possibilité d'une île*, *op. cit.*, p. 485.

In a certain sense, without going any further in this comparison due to the complexity of Heidegger theory, we could see how deep Houellebecq goes in the philosophical question of existence. This leads also to consider another aspect that is: is there a “perfect” human being to represent and to become a model for humanity?

We have already seen that there isn't any moral implication in the choice of representing a life such as the one of Daniel 1. He is not a positive model in any way, but he is chosen because he represent the common man, one among other whose sufferance, jealousy, desire, instinct, love are the sum of the misery of existence that is typically human. In this even if not a moral example he is maybe an ethical example, where ethic acquire the meaning of that tension towards life, the continuous struggle to arrive at the very end of it without any compromise, taking to very final stage humanity in all its misery, in all its wrong behaviors and bad ideas. This perseverance in living is what characterize Daniel 1. The violence of his life history, the imperfection and finitude the limits of his ideas of his intents, his enduring cynicism and instinctive incomprehensible hope is what defines humanity and it is the nostalgia for all this that moves neo-humans to action.

Houellebecq is trying to define humanity from a post-human point of view, so that the human condition appears apparently in his imperfection the “happy” form of living in comparison to the unhappy and repetitive lives of clones. In this looking at humanity with an utopian eye, one could see that the novel hide an utopian tension, a sort of positive idea of humanity that does not imply any morality and that is, in the end, the better form of living possible. In this sense Utopia is in the past, the future humans, has to go back to the roots of their essence to regain happiness. This is just anyway a false solution of the novel. Mary 23, pushed by the nostalgia for love, disappears in her quest for humans leaving just a final note from the Symposium and in particular Aristofane's conception of love, where love is the ultimate meaning of existence, through which the soul shines. For her Utopia is a possible concept, for her the re-appropriation of humanity passes through the re-appropriation of an utopian dimension of living.

Daniel 25, more tragically, rediscovers humanity through its hopelessness. Daniel 1's poetry, that lead him away towards the places

where he once lived, refers to the possibility of the existence of an happiness, that is comprehensible only at the end of it and that one cannot take hold of in the present but just retrospectively, or in an indefinable time, that is not contemporaneous to existence. That is the meaning to me of the very last lines of the poetry from which the title is taken:

Il existe au milieu du temps
La possibilité d'une île.

For Daniel 1, for humans, the island, is in the end, the classic utopian space, the place of happiness, a space-time category, as we have said in the title, that is on another level than the one of existence but not less true, nor less desirable, is a vital force despite the miseries and sufferance of being.

On one side we have then, this recuperation of the utopian dimension suggested by the words of Daniel 1 and the experience of Marie 23; Daniel 25 has a different destiny. He certainly can understand this tension to utopia and he arrives to recover this human feeling to the point that he uses a vital tension unknown to his predecessors to look for another quality of living, a deeper knowledge of human condition, but in the end he is not saved by this hope.

This neo-human acquires an even too deep knowledge of his condition than the one of his human predecessor. For him the possibility of an island is not possible:

la bonheur n'était pas un horizon possible. Le monde avait trahi. Mon corps m'appartenait pour un bref laps de temps; je n'atteindrais jamais l'objectif assigné. Le future était vide. Il était la montagne.¹⁶

The Utopia ends in a total dystopia, the island becomes the mountain, never to be climbed, overcome. Daniel 25 enters finally in the wait of the end of his existence, a nihilism that is beyond humanity, an awareness that is far more conscious of human condition that leaves not space for any so human feeling of hope. Daniel finally re-appropriate of the present, no more living in the nostalgia nor in the myth of the past,

nor in the wait for the future, a totally conscious being of his essence, of a possibility: to this form of post-humanity the only time possible is a still present.

As for us, being still humans, Houellebecq leaves at least the possibility of an island.

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