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Two freedoms. (Poetic) fragments of Michel Houellebecq

1.

Even in France, Michel Houellebecq's poetry remains overshadowed by his prose works, which have been widely received and usually valued highly. That is even more true in Poland. Yet the French writer authored several poetry collections published rather regularly, mainly in the 1990s. Those included *La Pour-suite du bonheur* (1991), *Le Sens du combat* (1996), *Renaissance* (1999), and *Configuration du dernier rivage* (2013). Since 2000, his poetry has been published in several selected and collected editions.

The hierarchy of genres in Houellebecq's writings, the centre of which is defined by novels, seems unalterable (those need to be supplemented with essays). But poetry (let me add that Houellebecq debuted as a poet) constitutes an important complement to his prose and essays. Significant both in terms of their themes (the same matters and motives reappear in them incessantly, or even obsessively), and problems (they express similar diagnoses of the structure of the world, and condition of contemporary times). Those reasons alone, i.e. the faint presence in Poland, and a significant consonance with the novels and essays, suffice to apply more careful attention to the poetry of the French author.

Immediately, I need to abandon some directions in the readings of Houellebecq's poems. I shall not focus on analysing their, actually worth analysing, poetics: one which is surprisingly traditional, which finds strong foundation in the classicist model fundamental for the French poetic tradition. Yet, one must at least note that the writer's poetic volumes are proof of his search for a "more capacious form" – as they include fragments written in prose, e.g. thoughts and remarks. His early collection entitled *Rester vivant, méthode* (1991) is sometimes listed as essays, sometimes poetry. Neither shall I, as that would require a different and

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separate study, conduct a direct comparison of Houellebecq's poems with his essays. Finally, I ought to make a reservation that this will not be a philological study, rather, putting it shortly, a philosophical-sociological one. In that sense, I shall consider the French author's poetry as a complete world-view expression.

Yet what is the object of this expression divided into individual poems? What notions co-create it, and are of key importance in it/ for it? Undoubtedly one of those is the notion of freedom. And to that notion – its usage and significance in Houellebecq's poetry, in its fragments structured using connected and unconnected speech – I shall devote my further consideration.

2.

In one such fragment, opening the *Rester vivant, méthode* collection, Houellebecq recorded the following thought:

If the world consists of suffering, it is so because in its essence, it is free. Suffering constitutes the unavoidable result of a free play of the elements of a system. We should know about that and say that. (p. 12)¹

That thought should be considered as the foundation of the writer's poetic searches circling around the notion of freedom. On the one hand, what stands out is its radicalism, on the other, its openness to various interpretations. The radicalism consists of a complete equalling or even association of freedom and suffering. Freedom understood as an ontological or structural essence of existence creates favourable conditions for suffering – it appears to be its source. Even more so – according to Houellebecq they are virtually the same. Such an association, as indicated by his prose, can be referred to various areas, and dimensions of existence.

Thus, what is uncovered first is its ontological-metaphysical perspective. The French author has not called it so directly, yet through the general character of his consideration, he has allowed such an interpretation. According to it, the structure of existence is filled with freedom. As I understand it, all deterministic thinking constitutes only an attempt at rationalising, and organising “the world”, which in its origin and, let me reiterate, essence is a free “world”. Yet free also means (the word appears many times in Houellebecq's poems) hollow, i.e. devoid of any measures and rules, norms and principles. A human being tossed into such a world

¹ All quotations from Michel Houellebecq's poetry come from the following edition: *Poesie*, Editions J'ai lu, Paris 2010. I am quoting in my own translation into Polish. [English version translated from Polish]. The numbers in brackets after quotations refer to that edition.

remains completely lonely, without any, metaphysically sanctioned, signs, directives, and references. Such thinking surely entails the tradition of existentialism in terms of its original and canonic form. I consider the original form according to the stipulations by Arthur Schopenhauer (the philosopher was quoted directly, and as a confession, in one of the poems), while the canonic form according to the 20th-century existentialism. The glossary of notions used by Houellebecq, in which freedom and suffering occupy an important place, refers to those particular sources of philosophical inspiration.

Then the “free play of the elements of the system” may refer to the physical-nature world – particularly when its word “parties” becomes translated – as in the title of one of the French writer’s novels – as “particles”. Yet it can also refer to the human, social world. According to Houellebecq’s views, those worlds seem to be governed by analogical or even identical laws and rules. Therefore, his poems include such an emphatic presence of animalistic metaphors, and so often there appear comparisons equalling man and animal (for example, and especially, to a dog).

3.

At this point, there emerges another, not philosophical but social, dimension of Houellebecq’s poetry. The philosopher becomes a sociologist, who tries to face the condition of the contemporary civilisation founded on liberal thinking, or even the dogma of liberalism – to study, describe, and evaluate it.

What does that poetically depicted civilisation look like in the poems of the French author? The principle of free exchange seems to be its basic principle, similarly to Jean Baudrillard’s considerations. What, then, is the object of that exchange? Mainly human bodies, which undergo it in social space. That is why in so many of Houellebecq’s poems the metaphor of that exchange becomes various forms and instances of pornography (stores and magazines, theatres and films), sex tourism in particular. They often include descriptions of holiday clubs in exotic countries, in which the freedom of changing bodies, and the provision of mutual sexual services assume a particularly emphatic shape, metaphorical and displaying verismo.

But the exchange cannot, of course, in any way satisfy the need for love. Thus so many poems by Houellebecq constitute variations on loneliness. Often that is reflected in the loneliness of an inhabitant of a big city (often a flâneur strolling the streets of Paris). Other poems directly express and confirm – as expressed in one of the works by Tadeusz Różewicz – the conviction that the contemporary erotic pieces can only be evidence of the need for love, a description of a lack of it.

Therefore, the social space recorded in the poems of the French writer constitutes a space of “human beings” (that is one of Houellebecq’s marked terms) circulating inside it, and their bodies, which enter exchange relations with each other. That space is, at the same time, materially very particular and casual. It is a world of modern skyscrapers (Paris’s La Defense borough, with its iconic GAN skyscraper, being its symbolic manifestation), hypermarkets, Paris metro, and TGV trains, as well as the previously mentioned holiday clubs and hotels.

The “free play of the elements of the system”, which continues in that world, is not, however, in any way approachable. Its social and spiritual outcomes do not only include estrangement and loneliness. Houellebecq sees the consequences of thus understood freedom much more radically. In a fragment of his poem, he thus defined them:

The society in which you live is poised to destroy you. (...) Indifference shall be its weapon. (p. 28)

And he added:

You cannot allow yourselves to accept the same attitude. Go on the attack! (p. 28)

At that moment the sociologist turns into a moralist who formulates directions on how to operate, and act within the space of freedom, which, in fact, proves a space of indifference, and condemns people to loneliness. He expressed them, for example, in a radically and unequivocally sounding sentence: “You must hate freedom as much as you can.” (p. 29)

That type of moralising assumed in some poems of Houellebecq’s works a distinctly political tone. One of such, entitled *Ostatni bastion przeciwko liberalizmowi*, in its rhetoric sounds at times almost like a programme or a slogan of a political party:

We reject liberal ideology because it cannot deliver any meaning, or mode of reconciling the individual with others within a community which could be consider human (...) Trust individual drive, that is what they keep telling you everywhere (...) To that, I have only one answer (...) That the individual, I’m talking about a human, is a small, both cruel and miserable animal, And that it’s futile to trust it, if it is not (...) limited (...) by the rigorous rules of inviolable morality, Which, of course, is no random manifestation (...) of liberal ideology. (p. 78–79)

I will not endeavour to discuss that project within political categories. I shall only state that the quoted words can, and actually do, sound strange and disturbing. Yet, of course, they do not mean that Houellebecq transitioned into an anti-

democratic stance, that he opposes emancipation processes, or, even less so, that he supports any form of authoritarianism. It is the project of a philosopher/poet, a sociologist/poet, and a moralist-poet, not a politician. A project which can, however, particularly from the point of view of liberalism which fetishises freedom, seem peculiar or even menacing in terms of its intentions.

4.

Therefore, the notion of freedom, which is key for Houellebecq's poetic works, reveals its two main meanings: an ontological one and a sociological one. On the one hand, the French author proposes a concept of the structure of existence based on freedom (together with other consequences of that fact, among which suffering bears particular significance). On the other, that role of Houellebecq seems incomparably more widely discussed both in France and in Poland. He formulates an insightful and critical diagnosis of the contemporary liberal society composing a (poetic) morality play worthy of the turn of the 21st century.

But, the core of Houellebecq's thinking, the indicated meanings of the notion of freedom cannot be divided exactly. That is the case for at least two reasons. First of all, because the ontological concept of existence conditions a social diagnosis (e.g. when the human world is described and interpreted within natural categories). Secondly, because in both cases freedom ceases to be an obvious, unquestionable, and undisputed value, and, paradoxically, in a similar manner it reveals its other, ambiguous, third dimension.

If, as deemed by Houellebecq, the world (including the social world) is a space of freedom, then (I am once again using his term) "human beings" put it to improper use. According to Martin Heidegger, freedom is the essence of the truth. Because only (as I understand that thought) in the light of freedom, can one see the truth, as freedom is its *sine qua non*. The French writer would surely agree with that statement. Yet the truth about the contemporary liberal society, which is revealed in the light of its freedom, is a dark and catastrophic truth as the "free play of the elements of the system", their circulation, and exchange result in suffering in various forms: loneliness, estrangement, and, finally, the sense of lack of meaning.

That is the case because meaning seems to only reside in discussions, it only flickers in dialogue. "We are a discussion", as Friedrich Holderlin wrote in a draft of his unfinished poem. Between human "nomads" and "molecules" (Houellebecq's terms), which form a whole, known as society, there is no such discussion, and there never can be one. It was replaced by an exchange of not even words,

between which meaning is born, but naked bodies of “both cruel and miserable animals.” Thus it was replaced, according to the laws of nature, by a “social Blitzkrieg” (p. 162), a “dog fight” (p. 179).

Therefore, Houellebecq eventually defined such a freedom as another, delusive and deceptive, “name for emptiness” (p. 282). And he recommended a thorough rethinking of it – a rethinking of the meanings, and the significance of one of the fundamental notions of the modern European culture. Yet before he himself set onto that task, he radically reversed the signs of values assigned to him by culture. He violated and questioned the freedom myth. He used for it irony and sarcasm, as those are the only means available to a poet. He discussed the social space as a numb space, an emptiness devoid of any discussions, in which there occur motions of “human beings” reduced to bodies, and compared to animals, in which there occurs an exchange and a struggle between them. He identified, as the final result of freedom, a decline of any “human form” (p. 284). He supported it, which, in fact, is a very French gesture when discussing “form”. One cannot assign that “form” to freedom considered ontologically. However, it is demanded, as Michel Houellebecq reminds us incessantly, by freedom in a social understanding. For the time being, though, as he states similarly emphatically in his works, we live in a convenient, yet empty, house of liberalism.

Bibliography

Michel Houellebecq, *Poesie*, Editions J'ai lu, Paris 2010.

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(Summary)

This article discusses the poetry of Michel Houellebecq. Its reading as a world-view statement is defined by its key notion of freedom. The thus specified reading enables one to identify various meanings of the notion included in the poems of the French writer: the philosophical and the social meanings.

Keywords: Michel Houellebecq, poetry, freedom