

Cloning and Nausea in *the Possibility of an Island**

Bir Ada İhtimali *Romanı'nda Klonlama ve Bulantı*

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Abstract: This paper investigates the physical and metaphorical meanings of nausea in Michel Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island*. Through the trope of cloning, Houellebecq likens the human body to a ship, and conflates existential nausea with nausea caused by inhabiting a body. The future clones of the narrator Daniel inhabit a world of 'neohumans' that are clones like themselves, and old-style, barbaric humans. Neohumans change their bodies through cloning, which after a while give them ship-sickness, or nausea. Daniel's nausea is shaped by his relationship with the Mediterranean throughout. The novel asks the question 'What happens to human consciousness when the body keeps changing and the white male body is propagated into the future?' Thus, the novel works as an allegory for the way the Mediterranean functions today both as a curative and lethal space for European endeavor.

Keywords: Cloning, Nausea, Houellebecq, Global North, Mediterranean

Öz: Bu makale Michel Houellebecq'in romanı *Bir Ada İhtimali'nde fiziksel ve mecazi bulantı arasındaki ilişkiyi inceleyecektir. Houellebecq insan bedenini bir gemiye benzeterek, metafizik iç bulantısıyla bir bedende hapsolmanın getirdiği bulantıyı harmanlar. Gelecekteki Daniel'in dünyası klonlar, yani 'yeni-insanlar' ve eski tarz 'barbar' insanlardan oluşmaktadır. Yeni-insanlar yaşlandıkça içlerinde rahat edemedikleri bedenleri; deniz tutması ya da bulantı hissettiren bu bedenleri klonlarıyla değiştirmektedir. Daniel'in mide bulantısı roman boyunca Akdeniz'le olan ilişkisiyle şekillenir. Roman 'Bedenler değiştikçe ve beyaz erkek bedeni geleceğe bu şekilde ilerledikçe bilincinden geriye ne kalmaktadır?' sorusunu sormaktadır. Akdeniz Daniel karakterini gelişiminde gözlemlediğimiz üzere Avrupa'nın geçmişini ve geleceğini kapsayan, bazen tedavi eden, bazen de ölüme sürükleyen ama mutlaka insanı içine çeken bir havzadır.*

Anahtar kelimeler: Klonlama, Bulantı, Houellebecq, Global Kuzey, Akdeniz

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Introduction

The word nausea comes from the Greek *naus*, the word for ship, and thus refers, literally, to ship-sickness. This is a condition caused by the fact that although you are not moving your limbs, you are being hurled this way and that, *and* covering space in time— a contradiction in mobility, so to speak. This paper aims to follow nausea as a metaphor in Michel Houellebecq's novel *The Possibility of an Island*, a title that suggests a movement towards an island that will put an end to this sea and/or ship-sickness. We are, to continue with Houellebecqian language, atomized ships looking for, not so much mainlands, but islands to drop anchor in. And the very ships, the very vessels that carry our consciousness, our bodies, betray us in this quest and this sense of betrayal manifests itself as nausea. In *The Possibility of an Island*, Houellebecq imagines a means of appeasement, a coming to terms with the human body: a perpetual cloning which should reduce the effects of ageing, an ageing Houellebecq's narrators experience as a nauseous betrayal. In this exploration of nausea, I will use Jean Paul Sartre's approach to the term, and couple it with Julie Kristeva's concept of *the abject* to make sense of the role it plays in Houellebecq's writing, acknowledging that he is an author obsessed with origins and genealogy.

Having reminded ourselves that the term nausea itself harks back to vessels and the sea, or indeed, long distance voyage, it would also be good to question the meanings the word nausea has acquired; such as in *ad nauseam*, revealing nausea's connection with repetition, a repetition that Houellebecq explores with the trope of the clone. However, nausea has slowly moved away from its meaning attached to mobility and repetition and come to denote the response we give to the *abject*, the refuse produced by the body. Sartre complicates this more common understanding of the concept with the question of which comes first: our capacity to feel something we recognize or conceptualize as nausea, or the refuse that causes it:

A dull and inescapable nausea perpetually reveals my body to my consciousness. [...] We must not take the term nausea as a metaphor derived from our physiological disgust. On the contrary we must realize that it is on the foundation of this nausea that all concrete and empirical nausea (nausea caused by spoiled meat, fresh blood, excrement, etc.) are produced and make us vomit. (Sartre, 1956, p. 338–9)

The nausea of consciousness of the body, of self-reflection, self-awareness, of seeing yourself and imagining how others see you precedes the actual distortion of the flesh, Sartre argues. This sense of looking at one's own body, a confusion between the subject

and object, leads one to the space of the *abject* as Kristeva sees it. Things that used to be of the body, but are now rejected by it are abject. What was once part of the subject has now become an (discardable) object, like the elderly that are left to die in France's sanatoriums as one of Daniel's clones explains in *The Possibility of an Island* (Houellebecq, 2006, p. 75). In that sense, the bodies in Houellebecq are described as abject, described by Kristeva (1982, p. 4) as "*what disturbs identity, system, order, what does not respect border, position, rules*" This sense of rejection has ontological and theological consequences: "*The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject*" (ibid).

An Atomized World

The Possibility of an Island opens with the rejection of death altogether: "*Welcome to eternal life, my friends*" says the unspecified narrator, a voice that we shall see splinter into successive narratives told by the various clones of Daniel. The book is divided into 'Part One: Commentary of Daniel²⁴', 'Part Two: Commentary of Daniel²⁵' and 'Final Commentary, Epilogue'. In the first two, the original Daniel's clones pass judgement on his life, providing extracts from his journal. The final chapter is the final clone leaving his cocooned life to experience how his ancestors used to live. The futuristic trope of the clone allows Houellebecq to explore the split subject position; a looking at oneself not just in a mirror, but from an ersatz consciousness *and* body.

The diarist Daniel¹, the original human of the Daniels to come, lives in our contemporary times and the experiences he recounts show that he is metaphorically constantly 'at sea' on Mediterranean shores. The sea carries with it the sense of unrestricted mobility, a perpetual nausea, and we never actually see Daniel¹ get in it. It falls to his 25th incarnation to experience that boundlessness— not as nausea, but as nourishment at the end of the novel. The narrative voice(s) of Daniel in the novel can also be said to be at sea— going from one island of consciousness to another, making trips between Daniel's clones and hence consciousnesses. In that sense, the novel's over all narrative oscillates between being sea-sick and marooned: nausea caused by motion, nausea caused by stagnation. This movement between the narrators can in turn be said to cause nausea in the reader too.

The first Daniel who lives in pre-cloning times is a comedian who is shown to have no respect for Western Europe's culture, and who in fact makes a living by degrading it for laughs. This is an intellectual stance that is often mocked in Houellebecq's work, although one can argue that he engages in this himself (Manganas, 2007; Zaretsky,

2019). The protagonist and narrator Daniel1 becomes the embodiment of all such intellectuals who make fun of Europe's heritage without adding to it anything of note. Little concerned with the development of occidental culture, Daniel1 is presented as interested in its deconstruction. In several places his narrative reads like the bildungsroman of a misanthrope who nurtures and guards his misanthropy needed to make comedy for financial gain and fame. Daniel1 explains how his path of collaboration with the dissipation of the West started with the disgust and nausea that marks his narrative throughout:

After my baccalaureate I signed up for acting lessons; there followed some inglorious years, during which I grew nastier and nastier, and as a consequence, more and more caustic; thanks to this, success finally arrived- on a scale which surprised me. I had begun with small sketches on reunited immigrant families, journalists for Le Monde and the mediocrity of the middle class in general- I successfully captured the incestuous temptations of mid-career intellectuals aroused by their daughters or daughters-in-law, with their bare belly-buttons and thongs showing above their trousers. In short, I was a cutting observer or social reality [...] While continuing to devote myself to the one-man show, I occasionally accepted invitations to appear on television programmes, which I chose for their big audiences and general mediocrity (Houellebecq, 2005, 12-13)

The choice of clown as a profession for Daniel1 connects him, albeit tenuously, with the way Hayden Carruth conceived of Sartre, the man who conceptualized nausea as an existential reaction: "*Sartre, for all his anguished disgust, can play the clown as well, and has done so often enough: a sort of fool at the metaphysical court*" (Hayden, 1964, v). Houellebecq positions Daniel1 as this clown at the court, and forges a link from Sartre to Daniel1, and of course to himself, as court clown. The court in this case is France; as clown, Daniel1 reflects the hypocrisy and pettiness of the French back at the public through narrative performance.

The performance aspect of nausea is spelled out in another passage in *The Possibility of an Island* as the distortions of the faces described call to mind Bakhtin's 'grotesque realism' (Bakhtin, 1984):

As I watched the cassettes, I became aware that I was suffering from a deeper and deeper malaise, sometimes bordering on nausea [...] what I found more and more unbearable wasn't even my face [...] what I no longer stand was laughter, laughter in itself, that sudden and violent distortion of the features that deforms the human face and strips it instantly of all dignity [...] Every time the audience laughed [...] I was obliged to turn away so as not to

see those hideous faces, those hundreds of faces moved by convulsions, agitated by hate (Houellebecq, 2005, 46–47)

Here Houellebecq provides us with an expose of the uncanniness of laughter, and how it is related to his sense of nausea. The human face distorted by laughter is not dissimilar to the face of people convulsed with disgust. Disgust, malaise, distortion, lack of dignity and hate; they converge in the *affect* of his profession. It is on the distorted faces of his audience that Daniel sees the predicament of France and its dying culture. More importantly, however, in Houellebecq's narratives, the body of the narrator and France itself are conflated, so the discontent Daniel feels about his body, and the state of France become metaphors for one another, and the nausea which at the beginning stems from distortions of others' bodies migrates to his own deteriorating frame, to a more Sartrean framework.

Daniel, living in a culture that moves on to the next body when the 'current incarnation' is deteriorating marvels, reading his ancestor's diary, at the way humans tried to cope with the aged body:

The now-ugly deteriorated bodies of the elderly were, however, already the object of unanimous disgust, and it was undoubtedly the heatwave of summer 2003, which was particularly deadly in France, that provoked the first consciousness of the phenomenon [...] only an authentically modern country was capable of treating old people purely as rubbish, and that such contempt for one's ancestors would have been inconceivable in Africa, or in a traditional Asian country. (Houellebecq, 2005, 74–75)

Here, Daniel's worry for the elderly bodies in France and France itself, converges with his own. In this moment of despair, he wants France to be a bit more like Africa or Asia, to ensure that when his own body elicits disgust because of old age, there will be people to take care of it. This sense is enhanced when he starts a relationship with a woman much younger than himself:

During my first weeks of my relationship with Esther [...] while walking beside her in a park, or along the beach, I was overwhelmed by an extraordinary drunkenness, I had the impression of being a boy of her age, and I walked more quickly, breathed deeply, walked upright and spoke loudly. At other times, however, on meeting our reflections in a mirror, I was filled with nausea, and breathless, I shrivelled between the covers; in one fell swoop, I felt so old, so flaccid. (Houellebecq, 2005, 175)

This is an uncanny moment before the mirror when one has difficulty in identifying with one's own body– in this case because love has led Daniel1 to fantasize that he is younger than he is. And so Daniel1's reaction to his own body seems to move towards Kristeva's understanding of 'the abject': "*what disturbs identity, system, order, what does not respect border, position, rules.*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4) as we see him unable to negotiate what he feels and what he sees in the mirror concerning his age. This is where Kristeva and Sartre come together for Daniel1. "*Kristeva's abject silently reads Sartrean nausea according to the subtler uncanny terms of absurdity that always threaten*" (Kuberski, 1994, p. 161). Indeed, Daniel1 is always on the verge of being absurd– acting like a 'boy of her age'. It is at the point where he can no longer stand the chasm that is opening between him and younger bodies, namely, when his young girl friend Esther leaves him, that he decides to join the Elohimite cult which offers eternal life through cloning for the wealthy.

Mediterranean Promises

In the world of the clones the 'Mediterranean' exists only as an empty shell. The clone Daniel24 can only see it through a screen on his computer. Daniel24's camera angle does not allow him to see the water. There are, however, figures that see the remnants of the Mediterranean, described as 'packs' or 'hordes' (Houellebecq, 2005, 42). These are the un-cloned barbaric humans who still live out in unprotected sites, but, who, in turn, may get a glimpse of Mediterranean water that is hidden from the camera network that serves the 'privileged' clones.

Just as Daniel24 is curious about the Mediterranean that Daniel1 knew, Daniel1 himself is interested about Mediterranean genealogy. His malaise concerning the Mediterranean is also a malaise about origins. This intellectual malaise manifests itself as physical and moral nausea. It is a symptomatic reflection of self-loathing as the birthplace of what Houellebecq likes to call 'the occident' (Attridge, 2017). The following are from the last page that Daniel24 reads of Daniel1's journal:

We are in September, the last holiday makers are about to leave [...] An endless autumn awaits me, followed by a sidereal winter; and this time I really have finished my task, I am well past the very last minutes, there is no more justification for my presence here [...] Before any sadness, any sorrow or any clearly definable loss, there is something else, which might be called the pure terror of space [...] The space is coming, it approaches and seeks to devour me. The ghosts are there, they constitute the space, they surround me. They feed upon the gouged-out eyes of men. (Houellebecq, 2005, p. 45)

Daniel1's nausea turns into pure horror of space as his consciousness prepares for an existence out of time. All of Daniel1's future clones surround him in this narrative, commenting, feeding on his life. Daniel24 has inherited the sense of nausea that precedes its cause, manifesting itself as a symptom of stagnation, being marooned in the compound made for neohuman use. Nausea happens when we travel in a vessel that does not suit our consciousness but can equally be caused by being stationary in the same vessel, in the same surroundings, *ad nauseam*. "*That solitary routine, intercut solely by intellectual exchanges [...] now seemed unbearable*" (Houellebecq, 2005, p. 383) Daniel25 says, describing his life as lived in his protected house, and looked after by the Elohimite system.

So Daniel25, a clone interested in human origins and fascinated by the wildings outside his gates, sets out on his own quest, and finds the origins of the sea and the origins of seasickness. In a way he re-enacts his ancestor's attraction to the sea, making his way towards the Mediterranean: "*I walked all day, then the following night, guiding myself by the constellations [...] Around midday I passed through the layer of cloud, and found myself facing the sea. I had reached the end of my journey*" (Houellebecq, 2005, p. 418) The great double dealer, producer of the sickness and the cure, the *pharmakon*, the medicine-poison (Derrida 1981) that is the sea: "*the whole of my body, however, greeted the salty bath with gratitude, I had the impression of being swept by a nutritive, benevolent wave*" (Houellebecq, 2005, p. 418) Feeling the curative powers of the sea, Daniel25 then contemplates on the meaning of the sea for his 'wild' ancestors:

So this was what men had called the sea, what they had considered the great consoler, the great destroyer as well, the one that erodes, that gently puts an end to things. I was impressed, and the last element missing from my comprehension of the species finally fell into place. I understood better, now, how the idea of the infinite had been able to germinate in the brain of these primates [...] I thought again of Daniel, of his residence in Almeira, which had been mine, of the young women on the beach, of his destruction by Esther, and for the first time, I was tempted to pity him, without however, respecting him (Houellebecq, 2005, p. 421)

Daniel25 identifies the sea as the source of the idea of the infinite, of the possibility of perpetual motion, of the possibility of perpetual nausea. This is, then, where the possibility of an island becomes appealing. Having left his protected life, this 24th clone might be the last Daniel consciousness marooned in a body, finally dying a 'natural' death, refusing a proliferation of his consciousness passing judgement on himself through time. "*I would avoid thought as I would avoid suffering*" he says, feeling betrayed

by the world, feeling not equal to the task set before him– to be happy, to feel comfortable in his skin, a goal he finds difficult to describe. Just as the yearning for the sea, Houellebecq suggests, this sense of being in vessels not suited to reach that unfathomable goal of contentment, remains the burden humans pass on to whatever existences shall replace them.

Conclusion

In *The Possibility of an Island*, nausea, as described in its many iterations by the original Daniel, functions as a physical and moral reality. We then see this feeling explored throughout all his clone reiterations, as they too are concerned with the sea and what it may mean. The consideration of the sea also leads the Daniels to think about their lives in nautical terms, such as being separate islands and being marooned in themselves. The interwoven narrations of the clones bring together assessments of the body that are conceptualized both in Sartre and in Kristeva. Nausea caused by Daniel's own body leads necessarily to abjection, a sense that pushes him to discard the old, nauseating body and seek a new one. However, as the narratives of various Daniels show, there is ultimately no way to abandon the body if we want our consciousness to survive. The possibility of consciousness outside the body is one that the last Daniel we encounter, Daniel25 is willing to consider, and this is where the novel leaves us: Daniel25 in the Mediterranean, living away from the comforts of the clone, abandoning himself to the forces of nature like his barbaric ancestors used to do centuries ago.

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