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## A FEAST FOR OUR TIME. ON EATING AND DRINKING IN MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ'S NOVELS

### ABSTRACT

The descriptions of characters' eating habits recurring in Michel Houellebecq's novels make a complex system of signs functioning at the textual and intertextual level as well as in reference to the extratextual reality, i.e., the situation of the Western society at the turn of the 21st century. The aim of this article is to identify the key points of this system and determine the possible directions of interpretation of these culinary motifs. For contemporary decadents from Houellebecq's novels, lone feasts are a new kind of ritual, which – unlike the traditional “ceremonies of eating” – does not help maintain interpersonal relationships but only provides temporary relief and helps them forget about problems.

KEYWORDS: Houellebecq, feast, eating, drinking, consumerist society, thematic criticism

### STRESZCZENIE

Regularnie powracające w powieściach Michela Houellebecqa przedstawienia zwyczajów żywieniowych bohaterów tworzą złożony system znaków, funkcjonujących na poziomie tekstu, intertekstu, a także w odniesieniu do rzeczywistości pozatekstualnej – sytuacji społeczeństwa Zachodu przełomu wieków. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest wskazanie węzłowych punktów tego systemu i wyznaczenie możliwych kierunków interpretacji wspomnianych motywów kulinarnych. Dla współczesnych dekadentów z powieści Houellebecqa samotne uczyta stają się nową formą rytuału, który w przeciwieństwie do tradycyjnych „ceremonii jedzenia” nie służy podtrzymywaniu więzi międzyludzkich, a jedynie przynosi doraźną ulgę i zapomnienie.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: uczyta, jedzenie, picie, społeczeństwo konsumpcyjne, krytyka tematyczna

People eat a great deal in Houellebecq's novels<sup>1</sup>. In his books, the French writer almost obsessively describes various food products, dishes and meals, from apéritifs to desserts. He also very often mentions all kinds of activities connected with food: buying, ordering, cooking and eating. Sometimes we may have the impression that this “most precise chronicler of his generation” (Morrey 2013: 2) has decided to

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<sup>1</sup> The inspiration for this paper was the study by Jean-Pierre Richard “La création de la forme chez Flaubert”, discussing the functions of the motif of eating in Flaubert's novels (see: Richard 1954). In the monograph *Houellebecq aux fourneaux*, which is an original combination of a literary studies essay and a cookery book, Jean-Marc Quaranta presents 76 recipes for dishes mentioned in Houellebecq's novels (see: Quaranta 2017).

prepare a faithful image of eating habits of the French at the turn of the 21st century for the future generations. However, the main role of literary presentations of eating is not just to accurately reflect the expressions of the “culinary culture”<sup>2</sup> of any nation. Fictitious accounts of meals should be perceived in the category of signs that simultaneously function at many levels of interpretation. As elements of a literary text, they are “a carrier of situational and psychological realism” (Kuchta 2014: 176). They create an illusion of the reality of the represented world<sup>3</sup> and point to some personality traits, preferences, needs, desires and fears of the characters. Moreover, descriptions of meals, the way of eating and its circumstances, which are constant elements of popular literature and recur in many variants in the works by authors from different periods, make books part of a network of intertextual allusions, which opens new possibilities of interpretation.

The semantic variety of literary culinary motifs also results from the fact that the aim of behaviors connected with eating is never simply to satisfy the biological need. Actually, they always carry the “surcharge of meaning”<sup>4</sup> (Cruckshank 2012: 543): “the decision of which products are for daily use and which are festive, the ways of preparing food, the principles of consumption and eating etiquette are undoubtedly a sign with some meanings in the network of socio-cultural relations” (Wieczorkiewicz 2014: 248). These behaviors provide valuable information on the social functioning of individuals, especially on the standards and values they uphold. They are also a sensitive indicator of transformations occurring in society and culture.

The descriptions of characters’ eating habits regularly mentioned in Houellebecq’s novels make a complex, multilevel, meaningful system, including both the above-mentioned textual phenomena and references to the extratextual reality: the situation of the Western society at the turn of the 21st century. The aim of this article is to identify the key points of this system and determine several possible directions of interpretation of culinary motifs present in Houellebecq’s prose.

The image of a richly set table full of appetizing food (Richard 1954: 137), characteristic of 19th-century realistic novels, is rarely mentioned in Houellebecq’s novels. His characters can only take part in “ceremonies of eating” (137) like those described by Balzac or Flaubert in the unique moments when everything is as they wish and the world seems to be more friendly than usual. In those rare moments, apart from experiencing palatable delights, they can feel the joy of eating together.

<sup>2</sup> Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński defines culinary culture as “a set of customs, standards and arts related to eating and drinking common in a certain area. Apart from specific ways of preparing food and beverages, [this term] [...] refers to the ways of producing food and to behaviors and habits such as the pace of eating, collecting food products, as well as typical places and times of meals” (Skowroński 2007: 362).

<sup>3</sup> To read more on the illusion of referentiality, also called the effect of reality, see: Riffaterre (1982) and Barthes (1968).

<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes writes about the “polysemy of food” (1961: 985).

With other people from his trip to Thailand, Michel from *Platform* admires “gratin dauphinois” and “the roast pork ... perfectly done, crisp but tender” (Houellebecq 2003: 79). He also remembers with delight the evening meal with Valérie’s parents: “The evening meal was a real feast: lobster, saddle of lamb, several cheeses, a strawberry tart and coffee. For my part, I was tempted to see this as evidence of acceptance” (211). At a sumptuous dinner at the Tanneurs, François from *Submission* has “tartlets stuffed with ducks’ necks and shallots, ... a salad of fava beans and dandelion with shaved Parmesan ... [and] a lamb shank confit with sautéed potatoes” (Houellebecq 2015: 147–150). And Bruno from *The Elementary Particles* remembers joyous moments spent as a little boy at the table with his beloved grandma, which seem to have been the only moments of relief in his sad childhood:

She had always been a good cook; here it became her only pleasure. She would cook lavish meals for Bruno, as though entertaining a party of ten: peppers marinated in olive oil, anchovies, potato salad; sometimes there would be five hors d’oeuvres before a main course of stuffed zucchini or rabbit with olives, from time to time a couscous.

(Houellebecq 2000: 33)

In all these situations, the characters share their meals in friendly and peaceful conditions that promote the exchange of emotions. In those cases, eating together is not motivated by the need to satisfy hunger but mostly by the desire to be with another human, sometimes even in intimate situations. The images mentioned above do not only fit the long tradition of joyous feasts that make their participants feel close to each other but are also a reminiscence of a ritual feast, whose basic function was to “establish a community” (Łeńska-Bąk 2007: 10): “Since ancient times, ... the table has united those who eat at it, not only providing them food, but first of all, creating a unique space where they can meet each other and establish relationships” (Michta 2010: 10).

It is symptomatic that sharing a meal is often an important element of Houellebecq’s protagonists’ romantic meetings with women. Jed Martin, an artist from *The Map and the Territory*, invites his friend Olga to a fashionable Paris restaurant, where they order “a gazpacho à l’arugula and semi-cooked lobster with a yam mash ... [and] pan-seared scallops and a baby-turbot and caraway soufflé with its Passe-Crassane pear emulsion” (Houellebecq 2011: 75). On Friday nights with Camille, Florent-Claude, the *Serotonin* protagonist, usually has “whelks with mayonnaise and lobster Thermidor” (154); at the meeting with Claire, he chooses from the menu “a small pot of Burgundy snails (six) with garlic butter, followed by pan-fried scallops in olive oil with tagliatelle” (103). On his way to Myriam, François buys champagne and regional cheeses, “Saint-Marcelin, Comté and Bleu des Causses” (Houellebecq 2015: 104). It seems that in the lives of Houellebecq’s characters “eating, desire, and sexuality are inextricable” (Cruikshank 2012: 543), and eating together is a form of intimacy of the lovers.

It is also noticeable that French dishes play an important role in the ceremonies of eating described by the author of *Serotonin*. In the rare moments of satisfaction with life, the protagonists discover their love for traditional national cuisine. Apart from the already mentioned French specialities, Houellebecq lists some “regional products (livarot, cider, apple juice, andouille)” (Houellebecq 2019: 182) purchased by Florent-Claude during his trip to Normandy, as well as excellent French wines – dom pérignon, ruinart, chablis, châteauneuf-du-pape or saint-estèphe – consumed at different occasions by the characters from *Whatever*, *Serotonin*, *The Map and the Territory*, *Submission* and *Platform* (see: Dutton 2020). The love for national dishes is also clearly visible in François’s excitement as he sees “butcher shops, cheese shops recommended by Petitrenaud and Pudlowski” in the 5th arrondissement of Paris (Houellebecq 2015: 231).

In the interpretation of the above-mentioned images, we need to remember the almost fanatic attachment of the French to the culinary tradition of their country. In 2010, their efforts resulted in including the French cuisine on the UNESCO National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (see: Jeanneret 2015: 751). As pointed out by Roland Barthes, the myth of French cuisine (Barthes 1961: 984), cultivated abroad by the French themselves, contributes to strengthening their national identity. Drinking French wine, which Barthes calls a “totem drink” (Barthes 1957: 74), or eating French cheeses, is perceived as a sign of belonging to the nation. By choosing beverages and dishes with centuries’ long tradition, Houellebecq’s characters seem to invite their ancestors to participate in a ritual feast.

The descriptions of “ceremonies of eating”, which occur relatively rarely in the prose by the author of *Submission*, are strongly contrasted to the much more frequent images of eating frozen food from the supermarket heated up in the microwave or cheap meals eaten quickly at low quality bars. Despite their special sensitivity to tastes and openness to the variety of cuisines, Houellebecq’s characters do not care about what and how they eat on a daily basis. Their meals are usually boring; they eat the same products all the time. The *Platform* protagonist mostly eats “Mouline instant mash with cheese” (Houellebecq 2003: 18) or buys “roast chicken” (135), Jed Martin heats up “lasagne in the microwave” (Houellebecq 2011: 53) all the time, Michel Djerzinski buys “tins of tuna at the supermarket in Courcelles-sur-Yvette and [goes] back to his room” (Houellebecq 2000: 75) to eat them alone. Bruno from *The Elementary Particles* also has regular junk food feasts:

[Bruno] started to eat. His diet quickly settled into a nutritious trip down the boulevard Saint-Michel. He would start with a hot dog from the stand on the corner of the rue Gay-Lussac; farther down, he would have a slice of pizza or a kebab. At McDonald’s on the boulevard Saint-Germain, he’d devour several cheeseburgers washed down with coke and a banana milkshake before staggering down the rue de la Harpe to finish off with some Tunisian pastries.

(Houellebecq 125–126)

Hastily eating low quality dishes related to different cultures may be interpreted as an expression of disregard for the national tradition or even an attempt to question

“the accumulated wisdom of our ancestors” (Barthes 1961: 983). Devouring a slice of pizza or a hamburger alone does not help build any community or commemorate any tradition.

This complete lack of interest in the quality of food eaten on a daily basis may be explained by the characters’ engagement in more important matters. Engrossed in creating art, doing research or reflecting on human existence, the protagonists seem to have no time for such banal activities as choosing the proper food and sticking to the principles of a healthy diet. It seems that apart from extraordinary situations, they treat eating as a necessity: something that they have to do for biological reasons but that is only a short break in much more important activities.

But apart from filling the stomach, the aim of eating convenience food hastily may be to alleviate sorrow and the sense of absurdity of life. It must be pointed out that nearly all the characters in Houellebecq’s novels suffer from depression, which according to the author can be considered as “a normal situation of a frustrated animal in our times” (Bormeau 2005), caused by the society which forces individuals to achieve unachievable goals that give them the illusive impression that happiness is at hand. Actually, for most of them, life is just a long chain of emotional failures. Deprived of emotional warmth in childhood, they have cold relationships with their parents (Jed Martin, François from *Submission*), sometimes even hostile (Bruno). Their relationships with women are basically short-term affairs, and even if they last longer, they always end up in total failure (the incompatible marriage of Jean-Yves from *Platform*, Florent-Claude’s hatred for the Japanese woman Yuzu in *Serotonin*). Reserved and avoiding other people, they rarely find friends or have relationships other than superficial contacts with workmates.

In this situation, gorging on food serves as a substitute of establishing close relationships, and the fullness achieved this way reduces the feeling of emotional emptiness, at least for some time. It is so in the case of little Bruno, who tries to compensate for the lack of parents’ love and forget the humiliation from peers at the boarding house: “He would pour cornflakes into a bowl, add milk and cream and a thick layer of sugar. Then he would eat. He would eat bowl after bowl until he felt sick. His stomach felt heavy. He felt almost happy” (Houellebecq 2000: 39). Jed Martin behaves in a similar way. Within the seven years devoted to painting the pictures from the ‘Series of Simple Professions’, “he didn’t meet many people, and formed no new relationship – whether sentimental or simply friendly” (Houellebecq 2011: 156) and the only moments of sensory pleasure he experienced were lone “org [ies] of Italian pasta after a raid on the Casino supermarket” (156). Eating is also the remedy to loneliness for Florent-Claude, who describes his feelings before Christmas:

I found myself on my own again, more alone than I had ever been; well, I had hummus, which is suited to solitary pleasures, but as the Christmas period is more delicate I would have needed a seafood platter, but that is something that should be shared; having a seafood platter on your own is scraping the barrel – even Françoise Sagan couldn’t have described that, it’s too dreadful for words.

(Houellebecq 2019: 159–160)

Although the protagonist of *Serotonin* fails to meet anyone to spend Christmas with, he finally finds a way to survive the Christmas Eve: "I had bought two whole andouilles and midnight mass would probably be shown on television, so I wasn't too badly off" (167–168).

The scenes described above seem to be an accurate illustration of some abnormalities in the psychophysical functioning of people suffering from depression. According to psychologists, they frequently resort to uncontrolled eating to satisfy their emotional hunger. Some psychoanalysts have noticed that depressed individuals are "orally fixated" (McWilliams 2009: 242) as a result of frustrations experienced in the early childhood, which strained their adaptation abilities. Premature weaning (literal or symbolic) results in the desire to experience frequent "oral gratifications" in adulthood (242). In light of these observations, Houellebecq's depressed protagonists who seek comfort in eating appear as typical representatives of the Western society, "regressing to the oral stage" (Houellebecq 2019: 315).

What is surprising is that though craving for contacts with other people, the protagonists of Houellebecq's novels usually eat alone, not only because they have no opportunities to do so with other people but also because they consciously avoid them. At meal times, Michel from *Platform* tries to keep away from the other tourists on his trip to Thailand:

I didn't feel much like eating with the others; I was a bit fed up with the others. [...] I still didn't feel like eating with the others. It is in our relations with other people that we gain a sense of ourselves; it's that, pretty much, that makes relations with other people unbearable (83–87).

The protagonist of *Whatever* would also prefer not to spend the lunch break with his colleagues during the training in Rouen. He suspects the meal "will prove interminable" (58) and he will have to politely talk about nothing for all that time. When asked something, he remains silent: "I chew on my steak béarnaise, pretending not to have heard the question" (58).

Depressed loners from Houellebecq's novels have probably lost their hope for establishing closer emotional relationships with anyone. Apparently, they do not feel relaxed even when eating with their closest relatives. During the holidays with his son, "[t]wice a day, Bruno would heat something in the microwave and they would eat at the table with hardly a word" (Houellebecq 2000: 138). Jed Martin finds it really hard to converse with his father he invites to the restaurant on Christmas Eve: "he chewed laboriously on his suckling pig, with about the same expression as if it were a piece of rubber; nothing indicated that he wanted to break the lengthening silence, and Jed [...] looked frenetically for some subject that might lend itself to conversation" (Houellebecq 2011: 23). That bitter experience makes the artist realize that "[i]t was pathetic and vain to want to establish a gastronomical conviviality that had no raison d'être, and which had not even conceivably ever had one" (23).

We cannot but conclude that in the world of Houellebecq's prose, eating together has lost its basic social function, i.e., maintaining family and social bonds. In this context, the caricature scenes of group meals, in which individuals focused on the food devour it greedily without paying attention to other people, have a special meaning. "Old" and "very old" guests of Chez Papa restaurant "chewed carefully, consciously, and even ferociously on dishes of traditional cuisine" (Houellebecq 2003: 22) "in silence, as if in a burn unit" (22). During the vacation in Cuba, other "astonishingly rapacious" (216) seniors sit in hotel restaurants, totally bored with their company and the attractions offered by the animators. Similarly, groups of Chinese tourists visiting the Vault-de-Lugny castle mostly focus on the waffles and sausages they can buy there, paying no attention to the people around them (see: Houellebecq 2011: 129).

In the atomised society whose members may only sit at the same table by coincidence, the main motivation to eat seems to be to escape from suffering, relieve emotional tension and fill one's life with any content. Doomed to drab existence among other unhappy loners, Houellebecq's characters fall into indifference and gradually lose the desire to live, which is symbolically reflected in their gradual loss of interest in the taste of the food they eat. Disappointed with relationships with women and totally bored with his job at university, François radically limits his menu to tasteless dishes from the supermarket. Exhausted with his previous existence, he admits: "for me nothing mattered except which Indian dinner I'd microwave [...] while I watched the political talk shows on France 2" (Houellebecq 2015: 24). The depressed nameless protagonist of *Whatever* unreflectively gorges on a disgusting "pizza, standing up, alone, in an establishment that [is] deserted – and which deserve[s] to remain so" (75). And depressed Florent-Claude recalls "picking up a slice of artisanal black pudding which [he] chewed for a long time [...] without really tasting it" (Houellebecq 2019: 199) at a particularly low moment.

At times, depression and apathy are replaced with a strong sense of disgust with the surrounding reality and other people. At a point of unusual mental clarity, the protagonist of *Whatever* admits: "I don't like this world. I definitely do not like it. The society in which I live disgusts me; advertising sickens me; computers make me puke" (82).

The surplus and variety of stimuli coming from the unfriendly reality in the form of images, information, views and ideas, so characteristic of the consumerist society, makes Houellebecq's characters nauseous (see: Baudrillard 1970). It is a telling fact that at the very beginning of his first novel, there is a scene in which the protagonist, under the influence of alcohol he has drunk and the of the overheard "last dismaying dregs of collapsing feminism" (Houellebecq 1998: 4) articulated by "the frumps of the department" (3), vomits on the carpet during a party at his colleague's place. Jed Martin also feels nauseous when – furious and disgusted – he destroys one of his works, devoted to contemporary artists and millionaires, Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons (see: Houellebecq 2011: 161). Florent-Claude feels like vomiting when seeing abhorrent works by a Japanese photographer and film maker

in the Japanese Institute of Culture (Houellebecq 2019: 39–40), and as for François, “even the word humanism made [him] want to vomit” (Houellebecq 2015: 204).

In the above fragments we could see literary allusions to the nausea felt by Sartre’s protagonist Antoine Roquentin, who spends his time on writing the biography of an obscure marquis in a small provincial town (see: Sartre 1965). As explained by Marek Błaszczuk, Roquentin’s nausea is caused by the “existence glut” (2019: 40) and the sense of absurdity of life. He is irritated not only by all the beings around him, but even by himself. Both the necessity to meet others and solitude are hard to bear, because isolation leads to reflection, sharpening the awareness of the meaninglessness of existence. On the emotional plane, that intellectual experience is accompanied by the feelings of disgust and nausea<sup>5</sup>.

According to Jerry Andrew Varsava, the protagonist of the debut novel *Whatever*, being the model of protagonists of all the following books by Houellebecq, is very much like the figure of Roquentin repeatedly suffering from nausea (see: Varsava 2005: 150). Both the biographer of Marquis de Rollebon and Houellebecq’s characters are literally and metaphorically nauseous as a result of the triviality of events, absurdity of life, disgust with themselves and with others, and the boredom they experience. It must be emphasized, though, that the “nausea” of characters created by the writer from Réunion is not only an expression of existential pain but also an acute physiological reaction to the excess of stimulants provided by the contemporary world.

An effective medicine for overeating, paradoxically, is to drink large doses of the most available intoxicating substance: alcohol. Trying to survive “in an otherwise generally inhuman and shitty age” (Houellebecq 2019: 163), Houellebecq’s characters drink huge amounts of liquor. Usually, they drink without any special occasions, often more than they should. The protagonist of *Whatever* gets really drunk even on the first page of the novel, then repeats it several times, and finally gets completely stoned at the night club “The Port of Call” (See: Houellebecq 1998: 3, 110–117). Florent-Claude “knock[s] back bottles of Cardenal Mendoza brandy” (Houellebecq 2019: 26) to endure the company of the hated partner. Fictitious Michel Houellebecq empties several bottles of wine during the meeting with Jed Martin (See: Houellebecq 2011: 223), and François “spen[ds] the night of [his] defense alone and very drunk” (Houellebecq 2015: 3) after obtaining the doctoral degree<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Nowaczyk points out that “the counterpart of intellectual absurdity of human life and existence is the emotional feeling of disgust with one’s life. [...] Then, the concept of *la nausée* is the emotional equivalent of the concept of absurdity of the world” (see: 79: 147).

<sup>6</sup> Sometimes, Houellebecq’s characters combine heavy drinking with devouring junk food, which seems to be quite an unusual remedy to the pain of existence in the consumerist society. Bruno’s father gets drunk with bourbon and then heats something up in the microwave, Bruno buys “a bottle of whiskey, a box of ravioli and a pack of ginger snaps” (Houellebecq 2000: 61–62, 111), Michel from *Platform* has some roast chicken with two bottles of Graves wine (135), and Aymeric – the last representative of the d’Harcourt aristocratic family, has “fried eggs, grilled black sausage and bacon, accompanied by coffee and then calvados” for breakfast (Houellebecq 2019: 128).



In this light, the protagonists of Houellebecq's novels appear to be the direct heirs of 19th-century decadents, continually using alcohol to alleviate their disgust with the world and painful disappointment with the society<sup>7</sup>. A special example of inspiration with *fin-de-siècle* is the habits of contemporary students described in *Serotonin*:

they got drunk in a group, but their drinking sessions themselves were different from the ones that I had known: they got violently drunk, they gulped down huge quantities of alcohol at great speed, as if to reach a state of drunkenness as quickly as possible; they got drunk exactly as miners must have done in the time of *Germinal* – the resemblance was further enhanced by the return in force of absinthe, which reached startling levels of alcohol and in fact made it possible to get plastered in a minimum amount of time (154–155).

But Houellebecq's protagonists do not only perceive alcohol as a way to forget the drab reality and irritating people. In their opinion, it actually helps broaden the horizons and stimulate the mind. Like their predecessors from over a century before, Houellebecq's "neo-decadents"<sup>8</sup> attribute really magical properties to the liquor they drink. Florent-Claude recalls: "three glasses of Leffè gradually helped me recover" (Houellebecq 2019: 292), "I poured myself a big glass of Poire Williams and quickly came to my senses" (190), and "[m]y reflections gradually deepened, thanks to the calvados" (62). Having thought about it for a while, François concludes "[i]t's hard to understand other people, to know what's hidden in their hearts, and without the assistance of alcohol it might never be done at all" (Houellebecq 2015: 129–130). It is also worth mentioning the surprising effect the bottles of wine drunk one after another have on the fictitious character Michel Houellebecq. Under the influence of wine, the apathetic writer regains his former vigor and with impressive clarity of mind tells Jed Martin about the good and bad sides of the "consumer society" (Houellebecq 2011: 218). We may have the impression that what all these characters seek in alcohol – after all, a material substance – is a way towards spirituality, rejected by the contemporary Western world.

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The descriptions of eating and drinking occurring many times in Houellebecq's novels can be interpreted at several planes. First of all, we can see that with few exceptions, most descriptions of foods and drinks consumed by his characters are very brief and often limited to the names of dishes only. The writer consistently avoids the presentation of the way of cooking them, describes their taste with very few adjectives, and does not refer to their appearance or smell at all. It seems that

<sup>7</sup> It is no coincidence that François's favorite novelist is Joris-Karl Huysmans, the author of *Against Nature*, likely being the most famous literary portrait of a 19th-century decadent: Duke des Esseintes. As mentioned above, the protagonist of *Submission* writes a doctoral dissertation about him.

<sup>8</sup> A term used by Régis-Pierre Fieu to refer to François, the protagonist of *Submission* (Fieu 2018: 56). It is worth noting that the protagonist of *Serotonin*, Florent-Claude, calls himself a "decadent" (295). Houellebecq's fascination with decadentism is discussed by Jean-Michel Wittmann (2013).

the author of *Elementary Particles*, sometimes perceived as a continuer and restorer of the realistic novel (see: Carlson 2011: 103)<sup>9</sup>, all the time plays with the convention of faithful reconstruction of the reality. The few descriptions of sumptuous meals which can be interpreted as alluding to realism fade in comparison to the numerous short remarks about a tin of tuna or a hamburger eaten quickly<sup>10</sup>.

It is also evident that in his books, Houellebecq ultimately does away with the topos of banquet, permeating the whole French prose, from Rabelais to Balzac and Flaubert. His characters mostly eat and drink alone, because doing so with other people makes them embarrassed, or even extremely irritated. Their solitary meals usually involve cramming convenience food from supermarkets or gas stations. It is hard, then, to expect them, not only to feel the joy of dining together, but even to enjoy their meals. In comparison to the numerous images of eating alone, the few descriptions of “ceremonies of eating” illustrate the degree of decomposition of interpersonal relationships in the crazy consumerist Western society.

Paradoxically, eating low quality foods with lots of alcohol in isolation plays a very important role in the lives of chronically depressed Houellebecq's protagonists, allowing them to relieve the emotional tension and reducing the pain caused by loneliness and the sense of absurdity of existence. In this sense, the junk meals of contemporary decadents from Houellebecq's novels are a new version of the “ritual”<sup>11</sup>, which may not make its participants close to each other but definitely offers them relief and an opportunity to forget.

Translated by Anna Artemiuk

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<sup>9</sup> Houellebecq does not discard the heritage of realism. As he admits, his books are much more like Balzac's works than like *nouveau roman* (see: Machado da Silva 2003: 87).

<sup>10</sup> Guillaume Bridet points to the “crude realism” in Houellebecq's novels (2008: 7).

<sup>11</sup> The topic of a meal as a ritual is discussed by Jean-Pierre Richard in the article referred to in the beginning (see: Richard 1954: 137).

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