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Abstract: This paper considers two European writers' critiques of the dysfunction and disagreement in society and politics. The concept of the "imaginary scenario" is developed and implemented to unpack texts constructed by authors to visualize and examine governmental and societal structures. Two writers from different nation-states, the French Michel Houellebecq (*Submission*) and the Portuguese Gonçalo M. Tavares (*Learning to Pray in the Age of Technique*), build their novels around a *Vorstellung* of how (future) individuals and people in power might act and speak, and this paper examines similarities and differences in these authors' strategies and visions. The "imaginary scenario," based on the work of Charles Taylor and Elena Esposito, posits that such (sur)real-perspectives evidently tell us something about the experience of the present. Our claim is that these European writers have to be considered in a critical context beyond the safe haven of autonomy: in their novels, they address readers as citizens and invite them to reflect on democratic practices. Thus, they prompt us to reconsider what it means to live in the EU and to reflect on its political realities and perspectives.

Imaginary Scenarios:
Literature and Democracy in Europe

Odile Heynders and Sander Bax

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Introduction

In January 2015, Europe was shocked by the violent attacks by Muslim terrorists on the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and on a kosher supermarket in eastern Paris, causing the death of twenty-two people. As before in Madrid (2004), Amsterdam (2004) and London (2005), the assassins' motives were various and complex but had to do with alienation, poverty, and a lack of future prospects within Muslim communities.[1] Although the attacks appeared

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[1] See Randall Hansen. Although Theo Van Gogh's murderer in Amsterdam was quite well educated, it seems that his religious radicalization ("I acted out of

to be a national incident, there were affiliations between the terrorists and Yemen as well as the Islamic State (Brunneé 101). Furthermore, the European dimension of the incident was marked by the march in Paris on 11 January 2015, when around two million people and forty leaders from all over Europe and the world – but, tellingly, not the American president or vice-president – gathered at the Place de la République to support freedom of speech. Across France and Europe, people expressed their solidarity by claiming "*Je suis Charlie*," while, in the centre of Paris, "La Marseillaise" was heard and President François Hollande walked arm in arm with German chancellor Angela Merkel as though they were the parents of the European Union.[2]

   More than a year later, we have witnessed a number of other serious attacks by Muslim fundamentalists on European soil: on 13 November 2015, synchronized shootings took place at the Bataclan Concert Hall and at restaurants and bars in the centre of Paris, killing 130 people; on 22 March 2016, bombings at Brussels Airport and Maalbeek Metro killed thirty-two. One consequence of the attacks has been the renewal of national efforts to tighten anti-terrorism regimes and surveillance. In addition, it is a widely held view that social media have played an important role in framing the attacks, inviting

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faith" [qtd. in Buruma 187-224]) was also motivated by a lack of future prospects.
[2] Significantly, some political leaders (among them Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu) oppose press freedom in their own countries. Jeremy Scahill, co-founder of *The Intercept*, not incorrectly referred to the "circus of hypocrisy" and underscored that France has a very Islamophobic position towards not only their immigrant communities but also towards second- and third-generation Arabs and members of other Muslim countries.

expressions of solidarity while simultaneously procuring general fear and appeals for legislative overreach (Toope 213).[3]

In the same week as the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, French author Michel Houellebecq (b. 1958) published his seventh novel, *Soumission* (*Submission*), in which a Parisian middle-aged academic observes a Muslim Brotherhood coalition come into power in France in 2022. In this moral and political story, Houellebecq imagines a future France, in which the country is transformed from a secular republic into a more spiritual and religious nation. The transformation is subtle but definite: Jews begin to emigrate to Israel, women start covering their legs and wearing veils, polygamy is encouraged, the university is restructured. The protagonist accepts the changes and even enjoys this new society. Houellebecq – whose friend, economist Bernard Maris, was a victim in the *Charlie Hebdo* attack – confronts the reader with a visionary "brave new world" that is both shocking and fascinating. Following in the footsteps of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, the French author creates an alternative near-future to critique today's political strategies. But, whereas Huxley and Orwell imagine a dystopia, a place as non-place, Houellebecq depicts a realist Paris which we can recognize and envision as a contemporary space. In this paper, we argue that this provocative realist setting as an obvious imaginary construct gives the novel a specific urgency. The *Vorstellung* critiques actual events and concerns.

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[3] While Paris has received so much attention as a sort of turning point, it is hard to explain why Oslo and Utøya, where Anders Behring Breivik shot seventy-seven (mostly young) people in July 2011, is not considered a decisive moment for Europe. Breivik, evidently, was driven by Islamophobia and a right-wing fear of multiculturalism; as such, he exemplifies a rising European xenophobia.

Houellebecq is not on his own in creating this type of realist scenario. We might think of German author Timur Vermes's hilarious and cynical novel *Er is wieder da* (*Look Who's Back*) (2012), which places Adolf Hitler in Berlin in 2011, where he becomes a mediagenic television personality, or Greek author Vassily Vassilikos's *And Dreams Are Dreams* (1996), which historicizes the Greece of its present day and prophetically alludes to the crisis that would take place a decade later. We could refer to Hungarian author László Krasznahorkai's novel *Satantango* (1985), an apocalyptic story set in a desolate village, where a character, long thought to be dead, returns home and people begin to fall under his spell, or to *De ontelbaren* (*The Uncountables*) (2005) by Belgian author Elvis Peeters[4], who offers us an image of thousands of migrants trying to get into western Europe and destabilizing ordinary life in a small town. All these novels are (sur)real and disturbing – three have been adapted as films – and they confront us with imaginary scenarios that prompt us to rethink and critique current politics and public issues.

In this article, we develop a theoretical conceptualization informed by Elena Esposito's concept of *wahrscheinlichen Realität* [probable reality] in our analysis of Houellebecq's *Submission* and Portuguese author Gonçalo M. Tavares's *Learning to Pray in the Age of Technique* (2007). A comparison of both authors' ideas and literary strategies will lead, in the final section, to a discussion of the

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[4] Elvis Peeters is a pseudonym for the collaboration of two authors: Jos Verlooy and Nicole van Bael.

democratic impact of literature in current European politics and critical thinking.

The Imaginary Scenario

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949) explore the dangers of social and technological progress. In this context, Huxley in particular questions the hedonistic nature of human beings, while Orwell examines the human drive to conform. The highly controlled Fordist new world and free savage reservations, along with the cold Republic of Oceania, can be considered representations of modern states, Huxley's model being American society while Orwell draws on the features of totalitarian regimes which developed in the Soviet Union and Germany in the 1920s and 1930s (Varricchio 54). *Brave New World* opens with an epigraph from the Russian philosopher Nicolas Berdiaeff – "*Les utopies apparaissent comme bien plus réalisables qu'on ne le croyait autrefois*": utopias appear to be much more possible than we might have thought – challenging the reader to reflect on current societal models which could transform into utopian places. Huxley's novel demonstrates that the utopia, notwithstanding its efficiency and stability, is not really a place in which to live: in the final section, Mr. Savage chooses to hang himself in order to escape the "welfare-tyranny" (Huxley 232).

    Houellebecq's fourth novel, *The Possibility of an Island* (2005), fits into the tradition of dystopian novels from the first half of the twentieth century, depicting the clones of his protagonist, Daniel 24 and Daniel 25. The clones seem warmer and more human than their

originator – even though, as neo-humans, they are said to go through life without joy and without mystery, living on sunlight, water and mineral salts and having only occasional, virtual contact with other neo-humans (Worton). *Submission*, however, cannot be considered dystopian, due to the presentation of a realistic and recognizable France, where, after (seemingly manipulated) democratic elections, an Islamic government is established. This setting, we claim, is less dystopian and more allegorical; that is, a provocative *Vorstellung* of how contemporary life might change should certain political and societal transformations occur. The imagined France of 2020, evidently, is less strange and fantastic than Huxley's vision of 2540.

The concept of the imaginary scenario, then, is preferable to the dystopia. It is a form of narrative or script in which a reflection on current societal issues takes place in a realist setting. It is a *Vorstellung* as mental image based on real events, topics, and discourses. The imaginary scenario offers an ideal moral order and, as such, prompts the reader to think about how to live together in society. We ground this concept in Charles Taylor's notion of "social imaginaries" as the way our contemporaries imagine the society in which they live. Social imaginaries are characteristic of western modernity: Taylor points to the market economy, the public sphere, and the self-governing people (2). These are imaginary concepts that string experiences of reality together. They are, so to speak, narrative constructs. Taylor's notion of social imaginaries can be expanded into an artistic complement illustrating the critical ideas and fantasies of contemporary literary authors. As Taylor argues, the social imaginary

as "the way our contemporaries imagine the societies they inhabit and sustain" (6) functions as a distant analogue to definitions of utopia, which refer to a way of things that "may be realized in some eventually possible conditions, but that meanwhile serve as a standard to steer by" and provide "the hermeneutic clue to understanding the real" (6-7).

In terms of literature, social imaginaries can refer to the ways in which authors imagine social and political conditions and invent images and narratives to represent and critique them. Norms and ideas are encapsulated in created realist stories. Taylor's modern imaginaries or "modes of narration" (177) can have a specific political implication within literature and, as is argued in this article, are made particularly relevant in some contemporary European novels. Taylor does not consider this, but one of his statements is immediately applicable to the novels we discuss. He argues: "like all forms of human imagination, the social imaginary can be full of self-serving fiction and suppression, but it also is an essential constituent of the real. It cannot be reduced to an insubstantial dream" (183). Whereas Taylor takes the social imaginary to mean a people's collective imagination of their social life, we use the imaginary scenario as a specific idea and critique on social and political issues presented by a novelist. The author creates a fiction that is probable and credible due to its real potential – or, as Italian literary theorist Elena Esposito

claims, "the fictive reality has consequences for the real reality."[5]
Esposito points to a doubling of reality [*Realitätsverdopplung*] and a
manifold offering of realities [*Überangebot an Realitäten*], which are
all real at the same time. She underlines:

> Each of these different dimensions of the real reality claims to
> be a reality, i.e., not only a fantasy, hallucination, or an at-
> random construction. The main point is the simultaneity of
> contingency and the lack of arbitrariness, and that
> underscores the modernity of the construction.[6]

Drawing on Taylor and Esposito, we argue that the imagination of the
novelists discussed here is not contingent or merely idiosyncratic but
addresses simultaneous realities which are experienced in society. As
such, their fiction makes us aware of the world and vice versa: the
world illustrates the fiction. The imaginary scenario is a fictional
construct rooted in reality, critiquing societal issues and events really
emerging. The novels may seem (sur)real but, in fact, offer us pivotal
ideas on the current transformation of European societies and politics.
Hence, our claim is that the European writers discussed here must be
considered in a new critical context beyond the frame of autonomy: in
the novel-as-scenario, the text addresses readers as citizens and
invites them to reflect on democratic practices. In the two sections

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[5] All translations are ours unless otherwise indicated. The original reads: "Die
fiktive Realität der *fiction* bleibt nicht ohne Folgen für die reale Realität" (Esposito,
Die Fiktion 11; emphasis in original).

[6] "Jeder dieser verschiedenen Bereiche der realen Realität beansprucht, eine
Realität zu sein, d.h. nicht nur eine Phantasie, eine Halluzination oder eine
willkürliches Gebilde. Der ausschlaggebende Punkt ist allerdings gerade die
Gleichzeitigkeit von Kontingenz und der Abwesenheit von Willkür, und darin
besteht die Modernität der Konstruktion" (Esposito, *Die Fiktion* 68).

that follow, the imaginary scenario will be used as a productive framework for the analysis of Houellebecq's *Submission* and Tavares's *Learning to Pray in the Age of Technique*, two contemporary novels that contextualize today's transforming Europe.

Spirituality as the Answer to Political Lethargy

After defending his dissertation on Joris-Karl Huysmans, the protagonist in Houellebecq's *Submission* realizes that the best part of his life is over: "so it goes, in the remaining Western social democracies, when your finish your studies" (5). With this opening passage, we are immediately situated in the critical imaginary scenario that the renowned French author creates around an academic, reasonably paid by a Parisian university, who has been lecturing for fifteen years while having regular affairs ("internships") with his female students. Considering the bleakness and mediocrity of his life, and with his last girlfriend having stopped seeing him months ago, François enters a midlife crisis. The tone of the novel is ironic as well as sceptical, as in Houellebecq's previous works. Since François is appointed full professor, he does not have to work as hard anymore, teaching only on Wednesdays. And then, not many students are interested: "When I gave my lecture, at eight, the hall was almost completely empty except for a small knot of chillingly serious Chinese women" (19).

Like Houellebecq's earlier novels, *Submission* is depressive realism, as Ben Jeffery argues in *Anti-Matter*, and the novel foregrounds a character defined by isolation and apathy. As such, he

is a typical Houellebecq hero, a "soft-bodied, aging cynic who yearns exclusively for sex with young women and then spirals off into brooding monologues about the impossibility of living when it eludes him" (8). Many critics have pointed to the autobiographical dimension of Houellebecq's work, and Jeffery refers to acquaintances of the author in order to affirm that the novels are "versions of his life" (9). There is a complex relationship among realism, autobiography, and fiction in *Submission*, between main characters and the author, between the inside and outside of the novel. This becomes clear when we consider Houellebecq's persona and performances in public. His self-presentation can be regarded as a form of literary negotiation between text and authorial figure. We might gesture, for example, towards of a humorous clip on YouTube in which we observe the author as *chansonnier* in the company of singer Jean-Louis Aubert; as he lip-syncs to the sung lines of one of his poems, we are confronted with the lost identity of the aging man (Aubert). Or we might refer to the 2014 film *The Kidnapping of Michel Houellebecq*, in which the author plays a version of himself being captured by three vague figures. The movie produces an ingenious construction of reality and can be understood as a narrative in which the real person and his fictionalized version have become hybridized. Both YouTube clip and film underscore a specific self-presentation of Houellebecq as a maladjusted, anti-bourgeois figure similar to almost all the protagonists in his oeuvre.

In *Submission*'s imaginary scenario, we are challenged to be aware of the inventive narrative construction the author establishes.

There is no escape from storytelling, as Jeffery underlines (57), but, at the same time, the story is very much a part of today's reality, of our conception and understanding of it. Houellebecq expresses cultural critique through realist depiction. The first part of the novel introduces the protagonist in his Parisian, academic life, while the second begins by depicting the political conditions of France in the year 2022 as election day approaches: the Muslim Brotherhood, led by Mohammed Ben Abbes, has intervened in French politics since 2017 and are considered less extreme than the Islamic Party. They even keep up good relations with Jewish religious authorities. Just before the election, the Brotherhood is "polling just behind the Socialists: at 21 versus 23 per cent. As for the traditional right, the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) had plateaued at 14 per cent. The National Front, with 32 per cent, remained far and away the leading party of France" (41).

It could be argued that François, in his own particular way, is interested in politics: "I'd always loved election night. I'd go so far as to say it's my favourite TV show, after the World Cup Finals" (60). But we might claim as well that the narrator, far more cynically, refers to the idea that present-day politics has been reduced merely to the polls, a television show with a wide range of actors, spectacle, and general entertainment. And it is quite easy to recognize current populist responses to politics from all over Europe: voters are

interested less in rational debate than in emotions, catastrophe, and sensation.[7]

From the midway point in Part Two until nearly the end of Part Three, the novel develops as a diary, beginning on Sunday 15 May and closing on Tuesday 31 May, when the centre-right party and the Socialists form a coalition, backing the Muslim Brotherhood. François writes the diary entries and discusses the political situation with an acquaintance, who explains to him that Ben Abbes is both a crafty politician (just like François Mitterrand was) and a moderate Muslim striving for a sort of Roman Empire, much bigger than France: "For him, European integration is just a means to this glorious end. The main thrust of his foreign policy will be to shift Europe's centre of gravity towards the south . . . Ben Abbes's true ambition . . . is eventually to be elected president of Europe – greater Europe, including all the Mediterranean countries" (128-29).

Ben Abbes believes in Europe as a project of civilization, as becomes clear when the University of Paris suddenly is transformed into the "Islamic University of Paris-Sorbonne" (148). François is offered a plentiful pension, even if he is only in his forties. Other consequences of Abbes's policies include a dramatic drop in crime in the most troubled neighbourhoods, a decline in unemployment after women leave the workforce en masse due to large subsidies for families, and drastic cuts to education funding. All these reforms are implemented to "restore the centrality, the dignity, of the family as the building block of society" (Houellebecq 165). On 25 May, François

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[7] See Jürgen Habermas's Europe: The Faltering Project.

watches a televised gathering at Place de la Concorde, led by populist politician Marine Le Pen, featuring people carrying placards with the slogans "We are the people of France" and "This is our home" (97). François, however, stays at home eating his meal and watching television as riots break out. The next day, he travels to the south of France and discovers that everything is unusually quiet and empty: "Something was happening in France, I knew it, and here I was, still driving along the hexagonal motorway system at two hundred kilometers per hour – and maybe that was the solution" (105). The suggestion of impending catastrophe becomes stronger: television and WiFi signals are down; polling stations have been attacked by armed men.

On 31 May, Ben Abbes and the Muslim Brotherhood win the elections, and François returns to Paris. In Part Four, he is put out of his job by the Islamic-led board of the university and realizes that he is now also deprived of all contact with female students. He begins to isolate himself, "one outing per week to the Géant Casino, for stocking up on food and for conversation, and a daily outing to the mailbox to collect the books I ordered on Amazon" (171). In Part Five, opening with an epigraph by Ayatollah Khomeini – "If Islam is not political, it is nothing" (185) – François is invited to edit a *Pléiade* edition of Huysmans's work and gets to know the academic Rediger, now president of the Sorbonne, who has converted to Islam and has settled into the new regime. François is asked to come back to the Sorbonne, but conversion to Islam is the stipulation. The main appeal of conversion seems to be polygamy – a possible way for François to

have sex with young girls. But Rediger explains that it is submission, itself, that is key: "The summit of human happiness resides in the most absolute submission . . . for me there's a connection between woman's submission to man . . . and the Islamic idea of man's submission to God" (217). In the final chapter of the novel, written in the future tense, it is suggested that François might make the decision to convert as well: "the idea was that I should bear witness in front of my new Muslim brothers, my equals in the sight of God" (248). He would have to testify that there is no God but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God, and, then, "it would be over, from then on I'd be a Muslim" (249). To François, apathetic and lacking strong principles, this could be an escape to happiness and maybe even love.

The imaginary scenario *Submission* offers is a near-future France – one of the core European nation-states in which Christianity has become insignificant – with an Islamic government and in which, as a consequence, each individual will have to decide whether or not to convert. Houellebecq's scenario is schematic and satirical but visionary as well, and, in our estimation, it is far less of a fiction than his other novels. *Submission* is absurd in its lack of stylization, but, evidently, for Houellebecq, this is the ideal way to approach what is happening in contemporary society. Form is the locus of social content, as Theodor Adorno claims in *Aesthetic Theory* (230), and the formlessness of the novel as such is, indeed, socially useful in its critique of French society. The plain – we could say unliterary – style of the text obviously makes readers uncomfortable.

According to Alex Preston in his review of the novel for the *Guardian*, Houellebecq seems to be saying that French society, in the form of its politicians, journalists, academics, and novelists, will get exactly what it deserves: a state run by those who believe in something bigger and grander than their elevated positions. *Submission* thus presents the moderate Muslim who takes over France as a force of spiritual integrity and revolutionary verve. The real targets of the novel are France's bloated institutions, its venal politicians, and sclerotic literary scene (Preston). The idea of a weakened, Europe-alienated France, was underlined by the author, too, in an interview published on *Die Zeit*:

> France is a special case in Europe. It is quite pessimistic, but has a strong demography. That could be a contradiction, but it testifies to a certain will to survive . . . Most of all, it despises its politicians, like nowhere else in Europe. And that is rightly so. Marine Le Pen profits from that. That could make one frightened.[8]

Houellebecq defends an anti-Enlightenment position in the interview and recommends his novels as designs of a new religion. "If we lose our freedom," Houellebecq claims, "we will not lose our cathedrals, we will not lose our Bach. There is much in the West that we will keep,

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[8] "Frankreich ist ein Spezialfall in Europa. Es ist ziemlich depressiv, hat aber eine gute Demografie. Das mag ein Widerspruch sein, zeugt aber von einem gewissen Überlebenswillen . . . vor allem verachtet es seine Politiker, wie das in keinem anderen europäischen Land der Fall ist. Und das ist berechtigt. Marine Le Pen profitiert davon. Davor kann man Angst haben" (Houellebecq, "Der Tod").

even if we leave the Enlightenment behind."[9] The imaginary scenario is an essential constituent of the real, and, as such, it should be understood as an aesthetic as well as political discourse. The novel's paradoxical negotiation of alienation and recognition is grounded in the reciprocity of realism and imagination.

No Politics without Moral Principles

Portuguese writer Gonçalo M. Tavares (b. 1970) constructs another European imaginary scenario in *Learning to Pray in the Age of Technique* (2007), one of four novels in his *Livros Pretos* (or "black books"). In a 2013 interview with filmmaker Pedro Sena Nunes, Tavares explained how imagination and reality are always mixed up, particularly in novels:

> the truth is that imagination and direct observation actually blend together a lot. Thus, when you are writing, things blend in such a way that at some point it's no longer imagination, dream, reflection, or reality, but just a thing. Sometimes, the sensation of not being able to distinguish what happened in reality from what came out of the imagination is one of the most enjoyable sensations: it's as if we constructed a new world in which the two normal categories no longer function. A novel, for example, destroys, it seems to me, the separation between the real and the imaginary. (Interview)

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[9] "Und wenn wir die Freiheit verlieren . . . Wir verlieren die Kathedralen nicht, wir verlieren Bach nicht. Es gibt sehr vieles im Westen, das uns erhalten bleibt, wenn wir die Aufklärung hinter uns lassen" ("Der Tod").

Not being able to make a distinction between reality and imagination relates to the persuasive power of the imaginary scenario, as we argue with regards to Tavares's novel. The protagonist is a skilled brain surgeon named Lenz Buchmann, a name that immediately takes the story out of a Portuguese context: character names such as Walser, Selig, Liegnitz, and Kestner refer us to central Europe, whereas other characters are simply nameless – the nurse, the dying woman, the vagabond, and so on. After having been a successful surgeon for many years, and after the death of his brother due to a brain tumour, Lenz decides to become a politician. He then rises to power until he falls victim to a tumour himself. Central to the novel is the amoral, militarist, and technical ethos underlying Lenz's success in the first part of the novel, but it falls short in the second. The message seems to be that a politician cannot reason without moral and communitarian principles.

Learning to Pray in the Age of Technique is situated in an undefined European city without precise indications of time and place, and it is this absence of contextual references that adds to the novel's allegorical dimension. Tavares creates an imaginary scenario that demonstrates how individuals in power can act, speak, and interfere in different discourses. Although Tavares never mentions concrete dates, it can be argued that the novel is contemporary and reflective of twenty-first-century socio-political issues: bombings that leave scores of victims in hospital, oversimplifications by populist politicians, the dominance of fear and hate speech. Additionally, the exaggerated importance of medical techniques in the first part of the novel

matches the current attention to cognitive science, rationality, and the hegemony of pragmatism. In the chapter "What does a finger matter?," Tavares describes the bureaucratization of the hospital, and this is evidently a critique of negligence in contemporary public institutions and the decline of the welfare state across Europe.

The plot of the novel develops in three main arenas: the hospital, the political sphere (represented by the city and its streets), and the family home. In the latter, "fear is illegal" (73), and there is a room – "the prison" (82) – in which Lenz and his brother Albert, as children, are locked up by their father. Frederich Buchmann is a reckless military man, forbidding his children to feel any fear, and this paternal figure is a central character in the novel, for he has transferred his worldview onto his son: Lenz sees life as an ongoing battle, and he describes both the human brain and society at large in solely militaristic terms. As a surgeon, Lenz reflects on his profession with martial imagery: "The brain, when seen up close, and understood thoroughly, has the form and the function of a weapon, no more than that" (16-17). And a good brain surgeon functions as a machine: "Precise and profound, this right hand, with its scalpel, expressed the various degrees of intensity one could have, in the world" (20). Within the body, the scalpel reinstates a lost order; indeed, Lenz occasionally even speaks of a new monarchy. Just as the artist creates order out of chaos in a perfect, harmonious artwork, the surgeon creates a new kingdom by restoring all that is unwell in the body.

In the first part of the novel, Lenz compares the brain of the individual to the city streets. The privilege of the surgeon to reorder the body is similar, the narrator seems to imply, to the privilege of the politician to decide on the urban map. In addition, Lenz observes that there is no connection between being a good person and being a good doctor: he hates when patients consider him "good" simply because he is a skilled doctor. Lenz thus constructs a barrier between his public and private lives. The skilled and technically brilliant brain surgeon is, in private, a morally degenerate person: "The pleasure he took in humiliating prostitutes, weak women, adolescents, beggars who knocked on his door, even his own wife, couldn't stand in starker contrast to the holy aura with which some of the relatives of sick people he'd operated on had surrounded him" (26). Lenz is portrayed as a man with a disturbing worldview who does contemptible things in his private life, such as taking his wife before the eyes of a vagabond. In contrast, however, he functions very well when applying his technical skills in hospital: in this arena, he is useful to society.

The real trouble begins with his transformation into a politician. After the death of his brother, Lenz aspires to a political career. Attending his brother's funeral and witnessing how people treat the mayor of the city, he becomes fascinated by power: "it was really a difference between a man presenting himself as an individual or accepting his place as a member of a group" (78). From that moment on, Lenz expands his territory of power and control. He no longer wants to take charge of individual brains; he desires to operate "on the illness of a whole city" (81). Lenz becomes a prominent member

of "The Party," a conspicuously unspecified political faction, and, within a short time, he becomes a famous politician. The way in which technique has served him at the operating table is comparable to the "elementary technique" of the politician in the "gigantic medical operation" that puts "thousands of people under the scalpel of a single political decision" (92).

In the last part of the novel, Lenz has to leave his powerful political post due to illness. His former secretary Julia Liegnitz and her brother take care of him in his own family home, described by Lenz as an "alien occupation" (205). It could be argued that Lenz's fall from power is a critique of his hubris as a politician, his ambition to take a godlike position in controlling and constructing individual lives and society as a whole. But there is a simultaneous irony here, too: in confronting the traditional Christian ethos with the modern war-machine worldview, the narrator underlines that all ideologies have as their ultimate goal the assertion of power over the individual.

The novel is composed of short chapters with evocative headings – for instance, "Fundamental Changes in the Position of the Mind," "A New Position in the World," "Medicine and War: Two Ways of Using Our Right Hand," and "Games You Can Play With Someone Who Has Lost His Reason." The segmentation of the story and the ironic tone establish a typical narrative discourse, at once representing events and affirming the illusion of storytelling. In addition, the heterogeneity of discursive registers (medical, political, militarist, technical, advertisement) is striking. In comparison to Houellebecq's *Submission*, *Learning to Pray in the Age of Technique* employs a wider

range of literary devices to underline the construction of the narrative and the postmodernist experiment of fiction.

And Tavares's narrative – like Houellebecq's – moves us to the edge of the real world. The author presents an exaggerated perspective on present-day politics, with its focus on efficiency, measurability, and usefulness, and the novel seems to imply that approaching politics as though it were a technical procedure is a recipe for disaster. The politicians in *Learning to Pray in the Age of Technique* are strongmen guided by a fierce military will. They have no moral anchor. To create fear and gain admiration, they have no difficulty fabricating and disseminating untruths. Indeed, their motto is "Fear is the mystery that speed conceals" (203). Lenz and his colleague Kestner decide, at one point, to blow up the city theatre in order to stoke fear among the people, a move that will inevitably lead to calls for a strong leader of The Party: "First, create a danger whose origin couldn't be identified; then, through this, force the population into movement; finally, prepare the ideal, strong stage from which two types of people will emerge: those who protect and those who are protected" (225).

Within its Nietzschean *Übermensch* framework, the novel demonstrates a cynical political order. Political leaders have just one motivation: achieving and maintaining their positions of power. And Lenz's political program bears a strong resemblance to contemporary populist politics, which, across Europe, exploits discourses of fear, anxiety, and xenophobia. Tavares's fictional novel is thus deeply rooted in the "real" world: as he emphasized to Nunes, he writes to

understand "the banality of evil" in contemporary society (Interview). *Learning to Pray in the Age of Technique* thus provides us with an imaginary scenario that depicts the potential cynicism of a society where a dominant political discourse is carried to its extreme: political leaders are motivated solely by guarding their positions of power, and they don't hesitate to attack their own people in the interest of self-preservation. In sketching this imaginary scenario, the novel offers readers the opportunity to dwell in its particular society, while also prompting them to reflect on their own. Differently from Houellebecq, Tavares uses imagination in order to blur the distinction between reality and fiction and, in so doing, emphasizes the real impact a fictional novel might have.

Imaginary Scenarios of Europe

Houellebecq's vision of a Muslim France is as probable as Tavares's city dominated by technocratic politicians who strive for power rather than moral and sensible government, especially since fear and disorder seem to be the strategic hallmarks of many present-day political leaders in and at the margins of Europe (such as Viktor Orbán, Viktor Yanukovych, Vladimir Putin, Bashar Hafez al-Assad or Recep Tayyip Erdoğan). Both *Submission* and *Learning to Pray in the Age of Technique* offer imaginary scenarios that are conceivably plausible in the context of a contemporary Europe struggling with nationalism, bureaucratic organization, and technocratic – or "pragmatic" – politicians. As Islamophobia and anti-Semitism continue to foment, there seems to be no vision whatsoever of Europe as a

community, of the European Union as a culturally motivated organization, or of Europe's continental past as a shared and open history.

The imaginary scenarios provided in Houellebecq's and Tavares's novels are narrative constructions that blend fiction and reality, imaginative ideas and actual facts, challenging readers to be active in negotiating meaning and reference. The novel as an imaginary scenario, therefore, reorders our sense of how things are (Felski 83). A cluster of terms such as knowledge, reference, truth, and mimesis appear when we read these novels as imaginary scenarios and accept their invitation to reflect on current socio-political issues. These literary works reveal something about the world in which we live and push us to respond as both reader and citizen. Literature, in this sense, plays a role in our social and political contexts and should not be confined to abstract, autonomous, and/or aesthetic categories and theories. Literature, as Tavares explains,

> can help us, as readers, to be aware, to detect the symptoms of evil emerging. It's not about becoming suspicious and cynical, it's not that. It's about becoming people who are aware; people who do not necessarily view the things that the whole of humanity seeks to acquire as good, wonderful things. We have to be aware of the signs because I think that history often repeats itself, only it becomes more and more violent. History, it seems to me, tends toward the repetition of evil but with more technologically advanced means each time. Hence,

the state of awareness shouldn't be, not even for a minute,

suspended. (Interview)

Submission and *Learning to Pray in the Age of Technique* deploy different but equally effective devices to raise awareness in their readers. Houellebecq's novel is based on de-stylization, on an almost discursive speech act. Tavares, in contrast, employs a style reminiscent of nineteenth-century literature, full of irony and hyperbole, with chapter headings that serve as provocative commentary.

In constructing imaginary scenarios, each author finds a way to continue and overcome the discrepancy between two existing forms of literary commitment. Jean-Paul Sartre, in *What is Literature?*, famously claimed that the engaged writer must use words as "loaded pistols"; when choosing to fire, one "must do it like a man, by aiming at targets" (24). The novel, then, as a genre, ought to be discursive and offer explicit commentary on political developments. Writing is not about contemplation, aesthetics, or imagination: it is about action. This Sartrean model opposes itself to the idea of literary commitment Adorno brings to the fore in *Aesthetic Theory*. Adorno claims that literature and art can only be truly committed to society when they refuse to be discursive, realistic, and explicit. His paradoxical statement holds that the more autonomous the text, the stronger its societal impact.[10] The effect of a literary text, according to

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[10] As Adorno writes, "art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and

Adorno, is situated not in its discursive message or thematic viewpoint but in the capacity of aesthetic devices to defamiliarize and estrange readers, who then become aware of their own presuppositions as the text hinders them from empathizing and identifying with its story and characters. Houellebecq's novel is discursive, but its satirical tone and apathy of its protagonist prevent unequivocal propagandic statements. Tavares, on the other hand, uses hyperbole to confront the reader with political discourses; in its estrangement, the novel is more affirmative or propagandizing than one might expect at the outset. The point, however, is that each novel, in its respective form, is socially decisive.

The imaginary scenarios discussed in this article succeed in challenging the reader, while emphasizing the double movement that Werner Wolf, in his work on aesthetic illusion, considers fundamental to literary fiction. Wolf describes the reading process as an oscillation, back and forth, between immersion in the text on one hand and awareness of its representationality on the other:

> Aesthetic illusion consists primarily of a feeling, with variable intensity, of being imaginatively and emotionally immersed in a represented world and of experiencing this world in a way similar (but not identical) to real life. At the same time, however, this impression of immersion is counterbalanced by a latent rational distance resulting from a culturally acquired

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qualifying as 'social useful,' it criticizes society by merely existing, for which puritans of all stripes condemn it" (225-26).

awareness of the difference between representation and
reality. (6)

Both *Submission* and *Learning to Pray in the Age of Technique* invite
their readers to settle in a story that creates a probable world. The
reader recognizes (some of) the characters in the novel as historical
figures or people that might really exist – or as people that function in
a recognizable city space and an actual political situation – even
though these figures have an allegorical function. On the other hand,
both texts make readers aware of the fact that this possible world in
which they dwell, and in which they might even start to believe, is in
fact an explicitly constructed scenario utilized by the authors to
explore contemporary politics and social developments. By
simultaneously immersing and estranging their readers, both texts
affect the perception and interpretation of actual reality. As Esposito
claims, "reality is unlikely,"[11] but fiction, on the other hand, can
contribute to reality:

> The events related in novels are not true, but neither are they
> false. They constitute a "second reality" that accompanies our
> real world of reference and enable us to assume the viewpoint
> of other characters, to live the lives of others to some degree
> and gain experience that we then apply also in running our
> own. The function of fiction in modern society lies essentially
> in this interweaving of different realities, where worlds that do
> not exist also have real consequences through their capacity

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[11] "die Realität ist unwahrscheinlich" (*Die Fiktion* 50).

to affect our perception and interpretation of "actual reality."

("Reality")

This claim about an awareness of our times – of what is happening and of what the consequences are – is an important one; it contributes to the framing of intellectual debates in distinct national contexts. Europe, as we see in both novels, as well as in the introduction to this article, is a complex project of political, cultural, social, religious, and economic phenomena. Authors thus provide alternative scenarios to stimulate reflection and debate (Heynders 15-20). Houellebecq and Tavares offer imaginary scenarios as food for thought, and, as such, they function as legislators of humanity. Their literature is a dynamic constellation of fictional statements and actual responses, rendering both timely and relevant the social dimension of their respective works. ◎

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