



Appetite for Depletion

Thoughts on Michel Houellebecq by Rob Doyle

Let us be clear: Michel Houellebecq wants to bring you down. If you are happy in your life, he wants to spoil it. Not out of particularly noble motivations: his agenda is propelled by spite, hostility, resentment. He is a nihilist—not in the pure, passive sense (if that were the case, we would never have heard from him) but actively, virulently. He is engaged with the world to the extent that he wants to undermine it. He is not on the side of ‘good’ or of improvement, or of humanity. He is wretched and he wants to infect you—and all the West—with his misery. Because he happens to possess a genius for literary seduction and an authentically harrowing vision, there is every danger that he will succeed. This, to my mind, is what makes him the most fascinating of living novelists.

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Objectively speaking, Michel Houellebecq probably should not be read. (I say that as an enthralled reader of everything he has ever published.) In a more robust, self-assured civilisation, Houellebecq and his ideas would be firmly suppressed, or he would simply be ignored by an indifferent public. Houellebecq knows this; the fact that he exists is part of his indictment. His success is his accusation.

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Houellebecq drains all the cheer out of life, because cheer requires illusion, ignorance and hypocrisy—all of which are healthy traits in any virile psychic economy, as Nietzsche understood. Again, Houellebecq knows this, having read his Nietzsche. But Houellebecq refuses us our vital errors, driven as he is by (more or less conscious) malice and resentment. In a sense, I wish I had never read him; though of course this is not really true—I read him raptly, and he inflicted exactly the kind of wound I was longing for.

After Nietzsche had first read Schopenhauer, his friends said he was no longer the man he had once been, so enervated was he by his predecessor's overwhelming pessimism. It took Nietzsche many years to claw his way back, to overcome Schopenhauer and posit new, anti-Schopenhauerian values. It would take a formidable force of will to overcome Houellebecq, once you have allowed him to whisper his insinuations in your ear. It may even be that, if you do have ears for Houellebecq, then you are already beyond help.

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Houellebecq stands apart from other literary nihilists like Thomas Bernhard, the Marquis de Sade, Bret Easton Ellis, and H.P. Lovecraft (the subject of Houellebecq's first book), in that his vision—entropic, pitiless, terrible—strives for, and arguably achieves, objectivity. He has done his research: Houellebecq's nihilism, which he intends to be viral and global, has the unholy force of a cold and



rigorous analysis, an unflinching depiction of a species and a civilisation in terminal drift. He is one of the few authors who I would describe as terrifying. Driven by rage, armed with the scientific method, and fine-tuned to the feel of the age, the despicable Houellebecq recreates our world in a harsh glare of empirical veracity, so that we are forced to see how loveless, hopeless, and brutal it has become.

A Bernhard, or even a Martin Amis, provokes or upsets us through a spewing forth of their private horror, their subjective, pathological, or paranoid conviction that all is putrid and hostile. Ultimately, though, someone like Bernhard comes to seem a bit silly. Close his book, pour a glass of rum, chat with your friends, and you will soon be persuaded that the world according to Bernhard, though unpleasant and claustrophobic, can be left safely outside the door; it is only the twisted vision of one unhappy man, an Austrian maniac of little relevance to your life. His interminable, denunciatory rants, though entertaining and sometimes unsettling, are at bottom as uninformed as the morbid pronouncements of a teenage Slipknot fan. (Judged solely on the depth and originality of his thought, Bernhard is an essentially adolescent writer.) Bernhard's life-hate and heavy-metal disgust for humanity are sincere and pure, but finally not very interesting, because they never reach beyond themselves, beyond Thomas Bernhard. They remain local, recognisably the subjective afflictions of the author and his interchangeable, misanthropic, neurotic characters. This despite Bernhard's attempts to universalise the tenets of his life-hate, most frequently through a spurious but catchy application of the collective first-person pronoun. The





subversive effect of Bernhard's torrential prose, spewed out in book after scarcely distinguishable book, is limited by the banality of his thought, which can be summed up in a few short sentences: life is awful; humanity is ridiculous; go and kill yourself. Bernhard cannot finally undermine us as he would like to. We cannot take him seriously enough to feel genuinely threatened. We close his books and get on with our lives.

Not so with Houellebecq. He is more dangerous, because he is more interesting, and he has read more. Equally hostile and aggressive as Bernhard, Houellebecq has gone much further: he has amassed the intellectual firepower to back up his assault on the very foundations of healthy, unconflicted life. His terroristic motive is subjective, forged in a biography replete with bullying, exclusion, and the agony of being unloved (his 'old slut of a mother' comes in for a lot of blame), but the vision he inflicts is terrible and insidious because it claims to represent the world as it is in itself—adrift, exhausted, at the bitter end of the Western Enlightenment project, and stripped of the last vestigial enchantments.

Backed up by a deep reading in sociology, anthropology, evolutionary biology, and philosophy, Houellebecq's intention is to perpetrate your undoing on an objective, incontestable basis. He wants to close off every air vent, block every fissure through which the oxygen might get in; he wants to smother all possibility of illusion.

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The facts of life according to Michel Houellebecq (a sampler):

– God is dead, of course; and with him went purpose, order and hope. The time for getting worked up about all that has passed. (Not the heroic, but the mundane stage of atheism.) The primary fact of a godless cosmos will simply be assumed: our intention will be to pursue the *implications* of this primary fact in a more rigorous and merciless manner than almost anyone has done since Nietzsche (who lost his nerve in the end), particularly as it applies to human sexuality. You will get hurt in the process. We offer no apology; we too are hurting.

– Europe is dying. The rot has set in, and the process is irreversible. The grand dreams of expansion and utopia have ended. We inherit an abandoned project, for which we no longer have the conviction, the discipline, or the backbone. Lacking any higher motivation, we fall back on ourselves, living shallow, aimless lives dedicated to the gratification of desire; these lives add up to nothing, are worth nothing, and cannot save us from the humiliating decline of our bodies (now a meaningless process), and lonely, hopeless deaths. ‘That is your fate,’ as the refrain runs through a certain Buddhist sutra. ‘You will not escape it.’

– We are all obsessed with getting older, and we have good reason to be. Devoid of an overarching mythical, religious, or even political narrative, our civilisation worships youth and despises the old. To be young is the sole desirable condition: the young can give and receive pleasure, and



they are attractive. These are the only possible remaining values (a late consequence of our civilisation's materialist suppositions.) Indeed, the bodies of the young are 'the only desirable commodity this world has ever produced.' In a universe bereft of illusions, sex is the single goal worth pursuing, the only experience which needs no justification beyond itself. Get it while you can.

– Our purported taste for egalitarianism in all things is revealed for what it is—shallow and inadequate—when we cast a cold, philosophic-anthropological eye on the arena of sexuality. There, we realise that inequality is inherent to life itself, that domination and submission, superiority and inferiority, are stubborn, bitter facts that will forever undermine any ideological attempts to pretend they don't exist. In a civilisation that bends over backwards to assure us all of our racial, social, political, and gender equality, we cannot help noticing that, when it comes to sex, some animals are more equal than others. Born into an arbitrary and vicious caste-system of attractiveness and ugliness, some live blessed lives of sexual plenty, while others are untouchable.

Sexual inequality has always been around, of course, and would not have become a source of newfound agony, had the kind of sexual morality that, ironically, persists today only in staunchly Islamic, Christian, or otherwise pre-modern societies, held fast. But the sixties came along and fucked it all up—suddenly anyone could screw anyone else; the fragile bonds of projection and fantasy needed to foster deep, life-long relationships took a battering, and love was seen for the first time to shit itself in fear. The bulwarks dissolved: man



found himself, naked and shivering, in the merciless glare of the sexual free-market. Thus began *the extension of the domain of the struggle*.

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The end of the nineteenth century gave us the Antichrist, Friedrich Nietzsche. A century later, we behold the Anti-Nietzsche¹, Michel Houellebecq. Houellebecq is Nietzsche stripped of hope, vigour, nobility and grandeur. For Houellebecq, man is not something that must be overcome, but at best domesticated, ideally put out of its misery. Nietzsche's gravest nightmare was the spectre of the 'last man': democratised, feminised, socialist, contented, slovenly, timid; a herd creature, a couch potato, a pen-pusher. Nietzsche (growing desperate) declared with increasing shrillness that the superman would come, that he *must* come, to enslave or exterminate the 'last man' and inaugurate a heroic new age of cruelty, grandeur, and cheerfulness. Having uttered his prophecies, Nietzsche raged, danced and ranted right into the madhouse, and the brink of the twentieth century. A couple of apocalyptic wars and a sexual revolution later, Houellebecq turned up to announce, with a jaded shrug, that the superman would not, in fact, be coming. Nothing would come. The time for great hopes had passed. All we had now was the global shopping centre ('the only horizon'), and we might even be glad of it. Our only remaining access to transcendence lay in the nerve endings along our cocks and clitorises. 'I am the last man,' said Michel Houellebecq,

¹ The phrase is taken from Malcolm Bull's provocative essay, 'Where is the Anti-Nietzsche?' (*New Left Review* 3, May-June 2000)





and blinked. ‘Now leave me alone with my Phuket whore and my modest vices, so I can while away my pointless life. Don’t talk of effort or heroism, or the wicked laughter of Dionysus that will ring out across the earth. It will not. Just be quiet. If the tedium of your existence is relieved by a nice blowjob now and then, and there is an efficient police force at hand to keep you safe from thugs and Arabs, count yourself lucky. Don’t neglect to avail of Third World sex tourism, if you can afford it and are ugly enough to need it. That will take the edge off. Everyone’s a winner. Less talk of upheaval, progress, and the grand destiny. Stop your bloody nonsense. Be quiet. Better.’

As the Anti-Nietzsche, Houellebecq places himself beyond Nietzschean accusations of unacknowledged *ressentiment* simply by being wholly truthful, to the point of comic self-abasement, about his own status and motives: he *is* resentful; he *knows* himself to be inferior; he *will* use his spleen and cunning to diminish his hated betters. And why shouldn’t he? After all, life is bitter and meaningless, and Houellebecq is abject, with nothing to lose—why not exert the modicum of power he has, just for the hell of it? Houellebecq’s agenda, then, differs from that of the Christians, anarchists, democrats and socialists who Nietzsche despised, in that Houellebecq is never deluded about what drives him. He is beyond reproof, because he is beyond redemption. This is an infuriating, irresponsible, dangerous position, the literary-ideological equivalent of a suicide bombing. Houellebecq is going out, and his only concern is that he takes as many of us with him as he can.

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Houellebecq is brutal, as brutal as a writer can be without being utterly repugnant. Yet his brutality is complicated because he himself tends to be on its receiving end (and not only in the most obvious case, in which the character ‘Michel Houellebecq’ in *The Map and the Territory*, is eviscerated and decapitated by a psychopathic avant-garde artist.) Houellebecq is among the wretched, the shamed, the contemptible, but he responds to his downtrodden status not with a Christ-like love for his fellow sufferers, or a revolutionary inversion of values, but with a resigned, masochistically rigorous elucidation of his abjection. His motto might be: *to disturb the comfortable, and finish off the disturbed*.

And yet Houellebecq’s very brutality finally transpires to be a sort of compassion. The truths presented in blunt, unadorned prose throughout his novels are precisely those that are almost never uttered in our society, not even in literature, because they are too shameful and too deflating to bear. For instance: some people are unattractive, and therefore receive no love, nor even the relief of sexual gratification. Such people often feel themselves to be worthless and better-off dead, and in some instances they may be correct: today there is no viable myth of consolation, Christian or otherwise, to blunt the agony of horrible lives—last will not be first, and the meek will inherit nothing.

Merely to say such a thing is to be brutal; there is no way to say it *without* being brutal. But which is more brutal: to say it, or to remain silent on the matter, which remains excruciatingly true? Which is more compassionate?

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Along with his beat-up, underdog likeability, it is Houellebecq's sense of humour that preserves him from our outright hostility. Amid the nastiness, hardcore sex, and depressing rhetoric of his books, there is plenty of whimsy, wit, and a grin-inducing eccentricity of style. And then there is a starker, more unsettling kind of anti-humour which feels distinctively Houellebecqian, grounded in unnerving bluntness and calmly acknowledged desperation. Consider this passage from *Platform*:

As a wealthy European, I could obtain food and the services of women more cheaply in other countries; as a decadent European, conscious of my approaching death, and given over entirely to selfishness, I could see no reason to deprive myself of such things. I was aware, however, that such a situation was barely tenable, that people like me were incapable of ensuring the survival of a society. Perhaps, more simply, we were unworthy of life.

Nobody should speak of themselves in this way. The condemnation is severe, almost absolute ('perhaps... unworthy of life'), but the tone is casual to the point of drollery. Sometimes, comedy is achieved by simply speaking the truth in as clear and direct a manner as possible. At other times, what tickles us is the spectacle of a man, lucid and articulate, holding forth on his own hopelessness—our laughter is triggered by the intuition of a common fate. In Houellebecq's anti-humour, we find both strands running together, without interruption.





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A further paradox: by way of a gleeful and brazen disrespect for literature, Houellebecq helps to keep literature respectable, and vital too. His novels are an odd, hybrid phenomenon: a kind of high-brow trash, an intellectual pulp-fiction. They are sleazy, punky, hyperbolic, and sometimes preposterous, yet always of an extreme seriousness. Houellebecq's insolence—the embodied insult and rebuke that is Michel Houellebecq—infuses even the form of his novels, which brashly announce themselves without concession to novelistic refinement or delicacy. At times, it really seems as if Houellebecq is deliberately doing all the things that are supposed to constitute 'bad writing'. His characters, often recruited to embody and promulgate the author's ideological prejudices, launch into improbable, lengthy speeches rather than carry out naturalistic dialogue; his narrators, be they in the first or the third person, do the same. Houellebecq's prose is thick with unabashed grandiloquence, and portentous utterances that even Martin Amis might blushing cross out. (One chapter in *Atomised*, charting the love affair between two characters, actually begins, 'In the midst of the suicide of the West, it was clear that they had no chance.')

I like to think that Houellebecq's incessantly flaunted bad taste is a performative strategy intended to make the point that neither 'good taste,' nor literature itself in its more polite and respectable guises, have done much to avert our drift into disorder, depletion and meaninglessness. Literature, it is widely felt, is in danger of becoming a nostalgia, a museum-



experience for hangers-on to a vanished past, of scant relevance to a stark and addled hypermodernity. Perhaps the only way for writing, for novels, for literature to connect with the new humans is to enact a vigorous, radicalised contempt for itself.

Having admired *Atomised*, Julian Barnes wrote a review of Houellebecq's subsequent book, *Platform*, highlighting all the ways in which it fails as a traditional novel—and thereby completely missed the point. For all his uncouthness as a novelist—deliberate or not—the one thing that Houellebecq will not do is write worthy, respectable, insipid stories that we forget as soon as we close the last page. For all its flaws, a book like *Platform* sears itself into the consciousness of many who read it; readers overlook its lapses as a traditional novel—its poor taste, sloppiness and indecorum—because of the electrifying sensation of encountering an author with something urgent and unheralded to say.

You can't really be an interesting novelist today, perhaps, if you have an uncomplicated faith in literature's undented relevance to contemporary humanity. Of course, every few years some David Shields comes along and tells us that the game is up for the novel; but this only happens because it's always true—novels have to continually reinvent themselves in order to stay fresh and relevant (stay novel) to human beings whose social, psychological, and technological landscapes are in constant morphosis. So far, despite every pronouncement of its demise, the novel has proven adaptable enough to stay relevant in the face of each cultural rupture since the dawn of the form in the seventeenth century. The world has always



been changing, and for the most part the novel has kept the pace. But never has the world undergone such rapid and disorientating mutations as we have lived through in recent decades. A contemporary novel which relies on models created by the conditions of a vanished era, and which favours traditional novelistic themes over the weird matter of our post-human lives, runs a high risk of irrelevancy. Such a novel might be read, but perhaps only dutifully, and to little effect, by people who have internalised the idea that reading novels *is a good thing*, or nostalgically, by those to whom novel-reading is an act of defiance or an anxiety-suppressant amid a disorientating, post-literary techno-culture (I sometimes suspect myself of belonging to either category).

Ironically, Houellebecq claims to be influenced predominantly by nineteenth century authors (with a shot of science-fiction to spike up the concoction). Yet he understands, along with the more engaging of contemporary novelists such as the post-Nobel J.M. Coetzee and the late David Foster Wallace (a more pious analyst of our malaise than Houellebecq), that the mode of living in the 'literary' cultures of Europe and North America, at this late historical moment, is too estranged from that of our forebears for the old techniques to really hit home any more. As ever, a new kind of novel is needed to honour the singularity of our suffering and the foreignness of our struggle. Or, as Houellebecq wryly puts it, 'We're a long way from *Wuthering Heights*, to say the least.'

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In *Public Enemies*, a book comprising the correspondence between Houellebecq and Bernhard-Henry Levy (which, incidentally, would be twice the book it is if they had cut out all of BHL's letters), Houellebecq recalls the shattering experience he had when first reading Pascal as an adolescent. 'It goes without saying,' he writes, 'that there must have been some *secret flaw* in me that I tumbled, feet together, offering not the least resistance, into the abyss that Pascal opened up beneath my feet.'

For me, reading Houellebecq for the first time exerted precisely such a ruinous fascination. I was twenty, studying philosophy, and locked into a three-year hell of severe depression and nervous derangement. Even though I knew I was badly disturbed (which is also how you know you are still sane), I had absolute confidence in the conclusions about the world, human life, and myself to which my relentless, pathological thought-processes had led me. Then I read Houellebecq, and the shock of recognition, like any perverse intoxication, was as gratifying as it was devastating. Houellebecq's vision spoke intimately and intensely to my own dismal worldview, while simultaneously compounding it, hounding out any residual hope, comfort, or vital illusion. Reading Houellebecq, I felt vindicated, yet even more alienated and suicidal than before. As Houellebecq himself understood with regard to his own epiphanic reading of Pascal, this was not a neutral reaction; there clearly pre-existed a receptivity to these kinds of truths, a masochistic need to be brutalised and tormented in just such a way. If I had been healthy, and not the feverish wreck I was then, I would have been immune to Houellebecq; I would, as so





many do, have brushed him off as a preposterous French fad and a poseur.

By the end of that period, having somehow completed my studies, I realised that I needed to get away from Ireland. I decided to spend a year or two in Asia—not, like the characters in Houellebecq's books, to indulge in sex-tourism, but to deepen my engagement with meditation and Eastern philosophy, a source of clarity and replenishment during my struggle for psychic reintegration. Around this time, as I was saving money to leave Ireland, Houellebecq's fourth novel, *The Possibility of an Island*, was published in English. Still as fascinated by Houellebecq as I had ever been, I would pick up the novel in bookshops and pore over its cover (typically adorned with a nubile, bikini-clad blonde making fuck-me eyes). I would read and reread the blurb, then open the book and read random sentences. I was desperate to devour the whole thing. But I didn't; I put it back on the shelf and flew to Thailand having made the decision not to read it just yet, nor any time soon. I knew I might not survive it. If that is not evidence of an author's literary achievement and intensity, I do not know what is.

Since then, maturity and experience have mitigated the impact of Houellebecq's work on me—but only to a degree. I am no longer severely depressed, and so I am no longer inclined to consider Houellebecq's decimated vision the *whole truth*; but I still consider it an urgent and daunting aspect of the truth. I come back time and again to Houellebecq's books, always mesmerised, always aware that only a handful of authors can affect me so powerfully. But beyond that, Houellebecq has got under my skin; his eerie, impassive





voice, which articulates such terrible things, never really goes away. Nor does what Houellebecq calls his ‘bacterial’ view of humanity—not a mere juvenile provocation, but a post-Christian, post-metaphysical insistence on seeing human beings and the cultures they engender in purely biological terms, with some strains acknowledged as being harmful and others beneficent. At times I feel as if Houellebecq has seduced me into theoretically cutting myself off from humanity, or cutting out my own heart.

There are two universal poles of attraction: one we can label replenishment, or spirit, or vitality, the other depletion, or decimation, or death. One offers sustenance, connectedness and direction; the other is the void. Life—at least, my life, but also, I suspect, human life—is a continuous negotiation with the two, a perilous effort to keep sight of the former (it becomes so vague, so boring), while forever succumbing to the lure—perverse, demonic, intense—of the latter. This struggle—between life and death as opposing objects of worship—has been around forever. But the parameters have now been altered. The void would seem to have the stronger arguments stacked on its side. The great question and challenge of our age—the supreme elephant in the room—is that of nihilism. Morality, justification, and purpose are no longer given to us; we are forced to choose, if not invent them. And if we are to be mercilessly clear-sighted and rational, knowing what we do now about the nature of things, then really, what is there that is worth committing to? What binds us, when all the ideologies and narratives are in ruin, and the illusions have been dispersed? Is there





any compelling reason to climb out of the pit of self and seek connection to a greater truth and purpose? Do such truths or purposes even exist? The stakes are high. The struggle with nihilism is nothing less than the struggle to prevent the living soul, in all its fragility, contingency and miraculous beauty, from committing suicide. To arrive at a nihilist conclusion means the cutting of all links to a shared world, and a premature burial in the dead soil of solitary ego. Nietzsche saw this, and it broke his courage—he ended by summoning new gods, new illusions, thereby becoming, in Cioran’s words, ‘a false iconoclast,’ ‘an anti-Christian Christian.’ Because of our epoch’s objective, species-level uncertainty about what we are supposed to do with ourselves—what the future is for—it now takes only a mildly pessimistic bent or ontological curiosity to find oneself personally confronted with this crisis of nihilism. Some of us, for reasons of pathology or temperament, are intoxicated by nihilism’s intense humming. We return to it as to a drug, or an abusive lover, or a charismatic tyrant. We keep coming back even as it batters, terrorises, and finally annihilates us. Residing at the furthestmost pole of depletion, void, despair, and death, is Michel Houellebecq—the euthanasiast of hope and seducer to nothingness.

