

## HATE AND HEDONISM

by JULIAN BARNES

The insolent art of Michel Houellebecq.

In 1998, I was one of the judges of the Prix Novembre, in Paris: a prize given, as its name implies, late in the literary season. After the Goncourt had got it wrong, and after stumblebum efforts by other prizes to correct the Goncourt's errors, the Prix Novembre would issue a final, authoritative verdict on the year. It was unusual for a French prize in having a (slowly) rotating jury, foreign judges—Mario Vargas Llosa was also there—and serious money attached: about thirty thousand dollars for the winner.

That year, the major prizes had all failed to honor Michel Houellebecq's "Les Particules Élémentaires," and for months le cas Houellebecq had been simmering. Schoolteachers had protested the book's explicit sexuality; the author had been

expelled from his own literary-philosophical group for intellectual heresy. Nor was it just the book that provoked. One female member of our jury declared that she had admired the novel until she watched its author on television. The Maecenas of the prize, a businessman whose interventions the previous year had been very low-key, made a lengthy and impassioned attack on Houellebecq. He seemed, at the least, to be indicating where he didn't want his money to go.



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In the course of a rather tense discussion, it was Vargas Llosa who came up with the best description of "Les Particules Élémentaires": "insolent." He meant it, naturally, as a term of praise. There are certain books—sardonic and acutely pessimistic—that systematically affront all our current habits of living, and treat our presumptions of mind as the delusions of the cretinous. Voltaire's "Candide" might be taken as the perfect example of literary insolence. In a different way, La Rochefoucauld is deeply insolent; so is Beckett, bleakly, and Roth, exuberantly. The book of insolence finds its targets in such concepts as a purposeful God, a benevolent and orderly universe, human altruism, the existence of free will.

Houellebecq's novel—his second—was very French in its mixture of intellectuality and eroticism; it was reminiscent of Tournier in the evident pride it took in its own theoretical bone structure. It also had its faults: a certain heavy-handedness, and a tendency for the characters to make speeches rather than utter dialogue. But, in its high ambition and its intransigence, it was clearly superior to the other immediate contender for the prize, a novel that was very French in a different way: elegant, controlled, and old-fashioned—or, rather, classique, as I learned to say in judges' jargon.

Houellebecq squeaked it by a single vote. Afterward, I was talking to the president of the jury, the writer and journalist Daniel Schneidermann, about the fuss our winner had kicked up in the press and on television. Perhaps, I suggested, it was just that he wasn't médiatique—mediagenic. "On the contrary," Schneidermann (who had voted for Houellebecq) replied. "He's médiatique by being anti-médiatique. It's very clever." An hour or so later, in a gilded salon of the Hotel Bristol, before literary Paris's smartest, a shabby figure in a baggy sweater and rumpled scarlet jeans took his check and—in the spirit of his novel—declined to wallow in bourgeois expressions of pleasure or gratitude. Not all were charmed. "It's an insult to the members of the jury," one French publisher whispered to me, "for him to accept the prize without having washed or gone to the dry cleaner's."

Our Maecenas also got huffy, and announced the following year that the Prix Novembre would be suspended for twelve months, so that we could discuss its future direction. Most jury members thought this unnecessary, not to say a touch insolent; so we decamped to a new sponsor and renamed ourselves the Prix Décembre. Meanwhile, the novel was translated into English, and Anglophones became aware of what Schneidermann had told me: its author was médiatique by being anti-médiatique. The literary world is one of the easiest in which to acquire a bad-boy reputation, and Houellebecq duly obliged. When the (female) profiler from the Times visited him, he got catatonically drunk, collapsed face down into his dinner, and told her he'd answer further questions only if she slept with him. Houellebecq's wife was also enlisted, posing for the photographer in her underwear and offering a loyal quote of treasurable quality. "Michel's not depressed," she told the interviewer. "It's the world that's depressing." If Houellebecq is, on the evidence of "The Elementary Particles," the most potentially weighty French novelist to emerge since Tournier—and the wait has been long, and therefore overpraise understandable—his third novel, "Platform" (translated by Frank Wynne; Knopf; \$25), opens with a nod in an earlier direction. No French writer could begin a novel "Father died last year" without specifically invoking Camus's "The Stranger." Houellebecq's narrator is called Renault, perhaps hinting that such a man has become a mere cog in a mechanized society; but the name also chimes with Meursault, Camus's narrator. And for a clincher: Renault's father has been sleeping with his

North African cleaner, Aïcha, whose brother beats the old man to death. When the son is brought face to face with his father's murderer, he reflects, "If I had had a gun, I would have shot him without a second thought. Killing that little shit . . . seemed to me a morally neutral act." Cut to Meursault's gunning down of the Arab on the beach in Algiers, and his similar moral indifference to the act.

But, in the sixty years that lie between "The Stranger" and "Platform," alienation and anomie have moved on. So have expressions of disrespect for the parent. As a schoolboy in the sixties, I found Meursault's transgressive opening words—"Mother died today. Or perhaps yesterday, I don't know"—registering like a slap (and I wasn't a pious son, either). Nowadays, you have to slap harder:

As I stood before the old man's coffin, unpleasant thoughts came to me. He had made the most of life, the old bastard; he was a clever cunt. "You had kids, you fucker," I said spiritedly, "you shoved your fat cock in my mother's cunt." I was a bit tense, I have to admit. It's not every day you have a death in the family.

Houellebecq ups the ante; but it's also his trademark to follow the coffinside vituperation with the wry "I was a bit tense." "The Elementary Particles" was hard to summarize (well, it's about the third "metaphysical mutation" of the last two thousand years, that of molecular biology, which will see cloning put an end to the fear of death and the miseries of genetic individualism . . .) without making it sound heavy; on the page, there was a satirical glee to its denunciations, drollery in the dystopia.

"Platform" begins very much in the mode of "The Elementary Particles," with a radically detached male narrator, a child of the information age, excoriating the falseness of the world. He boasts the "disinterested attitude appropriate to an accounts manager" toward almost everything. He is emotionally mute, and socially, too, and thus barely able to converse with Aïcha. When she begins criticizing Islam, he more or less agrees, though he isn't entirely hard-line about it: "On an intellectual level, I was suddenly capable of acknowledging the attractions of the Muslim vagina."

Anyone not yet offended? But Houellebecq, or, rather, "Michel," as his narrator is elidingly called, has barely started. Snorting contempt is coming the way of the following: Frederick Forsyth and John Grisham; Jacques Chirac; the Guide du Routard (a French equivalent of the Rough Guides); package tourists; France ("a sinister country, utterly sinister and bureaucratic"—copy that to Bush and Blair); the Chinese; the "bunch of morons [who] died for the sake of democracy" on Omaha Beach; most men; most women; children; the unattractive; the old; the West; Muslims; the French channel TV5; Muslims again; most artists; Muslims yet again; and finally, frequently, the narrator himself.

What does Michel approve of? Peepshows, massage parlors, pornography, Thai prostitutes, alcohol, Viagra (which helps you overcome the effects of alcohol), cigarettes, non-white women, masturbation, lesbianism, troilism, Agatha Christie, double penetration, fellatio, sex tourism, and women's underwear. You may have spotted an odd one out there. Frederick Forsyth may be a "halfwit," while John Grisham's books are good only for wanking into: "I ejaculated between two pages with a groan of satisfaction. They were going to stick together; didn't matter, it wasn't the kind of book you read twice." But Agatha Christie receives two pages of adulation, mainly for her novel "The Hollow," in which she makes clear that she understands "the sin of despair." This is "the sin of cutting oneself off from all warm and living human contacts"—which is, of course, the sin of Michel. "It is in our relations with other people," he remarks, "that we gain a sense of ourselves; it's that, pretty much, that makes relations with other people unbearable." Further: "Giving up on life . . . is the easiest thing a person can do"; and "Anything can happen in life, especially nothing."

The sin of despair is compounded when the sufferer is a hedonist. "Platform" is concerned with tourism, sex, and the combination of the two. Tourism is considered the biggest single industry on the planet, a pure locus of supply and deliberately massaged demand. One key appeal for the novelist is tourism's psychology: not least the central, Flaubertian irony whereby anticipation and remembrance (the brochure's false promise of happiness, the holiday snap's grinning lie) often prove more vivid and reliable than the moment itself. One key danger for the novelist—not always avoided here—is that of easy satire: tourists make soft targets not just for terrorists.

Houellebecq sends Michel off on a sun-and-sex vacation; his largely crass companions include the acceptable, indeed positively attractive Valérie, who works for a travel agency. Much of the immediate plot turns on her attempts and those of her colleague Jean-Yves to revive an ailing branch of the corporation they work for. This is all adequately done, though Houellebecq's strengths and interests as a writer are not particularly those of traditional narrative. His approach to a scene, and a theme, often reminds me of a joke current in Euro circles. A British delegate to some E.U. committee outlines his country's proposals, which, being British, are typically pragmatic, sensible, and detailed. The French delegate reflects noddingly on them for a considerable period of time, before delivering judgment: "Well, I can see that the plan will work in practice, but will it work in theory?"

Thus the primary, obvious link between sex and tourism is the carnal, interpersonal (and impersonal) one. But just as important for Houellebecq is to find the theoretical connection. Which he does: both sex and tourism exemplify the free market at its most free. Sex has always appeared capitalistic to Houellebecq. Here is his formulation from his first novel, "Whatever":

In an economic system where unfair dismissal is prohibited, every person more or less manages to find their place. In a sexual system where adultery is prohibited, every person more or less manages to find their bed mate. In a totally liberal economic system certain people accumulate considerable fortunes; others stagnate in unemployment and misery. In a totally liberal sexual system certain people have a varied and exciting erotic life; others are reduced to masturbation and solitude.

This kind of swift, audacious linkage is Houellebecq at his best; he loves nothing more than working over what in "The Elementary Particles" he called "the libidinal, hedonistic American option." But his actual writing about sex in "Platform" is curiously both pornographic and sentimental. Pornographic in the sense of taking all its moves and images from pornography (who put what where and moved it whither, until a convulsive spurt-'n'-groan); also, written like pornography of a decent, middle-ranking kind (the translation, throughout, is exemplary). Sentimental in that the novel's really nice, straightforward characters are Oriental masseuses and prostitutes, who are presented as being without flaws, diseases, pimps, addictions, or hangups. Pornographic and sentimental in that nothing ever goes wrong with the sexual act: pneumatic bliss is always obtained, no one ever says "No" or "Stop" or even "Wait," and you just have to beckon to a non-white-skinned maid on the hotel terrace for her to pop into the room, quickly reveal that she is braless, and slide seamlessly into a threesome. Houellebecq sees through everything in the world except commercial sex, which he describes—perhaps appropriately—like one who believes every word and picture of a holiday brochure.

And then there is love. "I really love women," Michel tells us on the opening page. Later, he elaborates: "My enthusiasm for pussy" is one of "my few remaining recognizable, fully human qualities." Despite "loving women," Michel pointedly never refers to his mother. And when this depressed, old-at-forty sex tourist gradually finds himself becoming involved with Valérie, you wonder how Houellebecq will handle it. After all, it is a piece of literary insolence to make such a character fall in love in the first place. So how is love different for Michel from commercial sex? Happily, not very. Valérie, though at first she appears rather dowdy and browbeaten, turns out to have wonderful breasts; she is as good in bed as a Thai prostitute, and she doesn't just go along with threesomes—she instigates them. She is by nature docile, yet she holds down a good job and is very well paid; like Michel, she scorns designer clothes. And that's about it, really. They don't do any of that old stuff like talking about feelings, or thinking about them; they don't go out much together, though he does take her to a wife-swap bar and an S & M club. He does a spot of cooking; she is often so tired from work that it isn't until the next morning that she can give him a blow job. This is less insolent than fictionally disappointing. Oh, and Valérie has to die, of course, just when she has found happiness and the couple have decided to live on a paradise island. The setup, and execution, of this would have been improved upon by Grisham or Forsyth.

Why, to go back to the start, does Michel hate his father so? This is one question a normally inquisitive reader might ask after that coffinside denunciation. What do we learn of this "old bastard," this "clever cunt," this "moron in shorts," this "hideously representative element" of the twentieth century? That he was over seventy when he died, that Aïcha was "very fond" of him, that he exercised a lot and owned a Toyota Land Cruiser. Hardly grounds enough, you might think. But we also learn, further on, that this monster was once struck down by a sudden, inexplicable depression. "His mountaineering friends had stood around awkwardly, powerless in the face of the disease. The reason he immersed himself in sports, he once told me, was to stupefy himself, to stop himself from thinking." This is all new (we hadn't been told before that the father was a mountaineer); and you might think, since Michel is himself depressed, that it might have been reason for sympathy. But this is all we get, and the father swiftly disappears from the narrative, as he does from Michel's thoughts.

Within the novel, the filial hatred is just an inexplicable given. But in an interview Houellebecq gave a few years ago in the magazine *Lire* he says that his parents abandoned him when he was five, leaving him in the care of a grandmother. "My father developed early on a sense of excessive guilt," Houellebecq says. "He once told me the strangest thing: that he devoted himself to intense physical activity so much because it stopped him thinking. He was a mountain guide."

No reason why this strange confession shouldn't be used by a novelist; but if it is to work it needs to be supported fictionally. In "Platform," the slippage between Michel R. and Michel H. is more serious than this bit of autobiographical leaching might suggest. There are problems with the narrative, officially a first-person account by Michel R., but one that (insolently?—well, anyway, unjustifiedly) dodges into the third person if it needs to tell us what only Michel H. can know. (There is even an incompetent moment when Michel R. gives us his judgment on a character he hasn't yet met.) Within Michel himself, there is also some curious slippage. Thus he sets off on holiday with "two American best-sellers that I'd bought pretty much at random at the airport" (this despite feeling *de haut en bas* about Forsyth and Grisham); he also has the *Guide du Routard*. Fair enough for a sex tourist, you may think. Later, a little surprisingly, he panics at the thought of having nothing to read. Later still, back home, he turns out to be an assiduous reader of Auguste Comte and Milan Kundera; he also quotes confidently from Kant, Schopenhauer, and social theoreticians. Is this credibly the same character, or is it someone shifting to meet the needs of the moment?

The sense of Houellebecq's being a clever man who is a less than clever novelist obtrudes most in the novel's dealings with Islam. Structurally, the function of what Michel calls the "absurd religion" appears to be to deliver, at the end, an extreme and murderous disapproval of the happy sex tourists. Its running presence, however, consists in a trio of outbursts. The first is from Aïcha, who launches unmasked into a denunciation of her Mecca-stupefied father and her useless brothers ("They get blind drunk on pastis and all the while they strut around pretending to be the guardians of the one true faith, and they treat me like a slut because I prefer to go out and work rather than marry some stupid bastard like them"). Next, there is an Egyptian once encountered by Michel in the Valley of the Kings, an immensely cultivated and intelligent genetic engineer, for whom Muslims are "the losers of the Sahara" and Islam a religion born among "filthy Bedouin" who did nothing but "bugger their camels." Then, there is a Jordanian

banker met in Bangkok, who in the course of a general denunciation points out that the sexual paradise promised to Islamic martyrs is much more cheaply obtainable in any hotel massage parlor. Extraordinary that three casual meetings on three different continents should turn up three vociferous Arab Islam-despisers who disappear from the narrative immediately their work is done. This isn't so much an author with his thumb on the scales as one clambering into the weighing pan and doing a tap dance. (Book-chat parenthesis: Houellebecq told Lire that his mother had become a Muslim, adding, "I can't bear Islam.")

Before I started reading this novel, a friend gave me an unexpected warning: "There's a scene where the narrator and his girlfriend and another woman have a threesome in the hammam at the thalassotherapy center in Dinard." His tone hardening, he went on, "Well, I've been there, and it's just not possible." He is not a pedantic man, and his attitude surprised me. But now I quite understand it. Fictional insolence is a high-risk venture; it must, as "The Elementary Particles" did, take you by the ear and brain and frogmarch you, convince you with the force of its rhetoric and the rigor of its despair. It should allow no time for reactions like Hang on, that's not true; or Surely, people aren't that bad; or even Actually, I'd like to think this one over. "Platform," fuelled more by opinions and riffs and moments of provocation than by thorough narrative, allows such questionings to enter the reader's head far too often. Is sex like this? Is love like this? Are Muslims like this? Is humanity like this? Is Michel depressed, or is the world depressing? Camus, who began by creating in Meursault one of the most disaffected characters in postwar fiction, ended by writing "The First Man," in which ordinary lives are depicted with the richest observation and sympathy. The trajectory of Houellebecq's world view will be worth following.