

Generation 68

The publication of Michel Houellebecq's second novel, *Les Particules élémentaires*, was the great literary event in France last autumn. As a result, Houellebecq, who had a cult success in 1994 with his first novel (now translated into English as *Whatever*), has been variously denounced as a Stalinist, a racist, a eugenicist and a pornographer; he has been called anti-feminist, homophobic and anti-Green; been fêted by the Catholic Right for his views on abortion; put on a blacklist by schoolteachers who, apart from anything else, probably took exception to seeing their profession depicted in the sordid central character, Bruno Clément; and attacked by *lycéens* (only in France, surely, could sixth-formers be so exercised by a new work of fiction). The generation of *soixante-huitards* has particular cause to be unhappy, for, by attacking as platitudes its ideals of individualism and free will, the forty-year-old Houellebecq has struck at the heart of the French liberal Establishment. In a very Parisian coup, he was sacked from the editorial board of *Perpendiculaire*, a left-wing journal set up in 1995. The other editors took the unusual step of interviewing him in an attempt to make him justify the opinions expressed in his book - a process likened by Houellebecq to a political trial. Embarrassment, or perhaps just good publicity, was heaped on the publishers of *Perpendiculaire*, who also brought out *Les Particules*. The book has been on the bestseller list (it was awarded the Prix Novembre), and its author has appeared surprised (disingenuously, surely) to be cast into the limelight. . .

Les Particules élémentaires is a novel on the grand scale. It is almost Balzacian in its attention to detail, and dauntingly ambitious in its determination to tackle "big themes": the descent of the West into an orgy of consumerism, the decline of Christianity, the potential of human cloning and the destructive nature of the liberal values and sexual permissiveness of the 1960s, which have, in the author's view, atomized society (the title refers to this idea). But as well as being a forceful polemical tract, *Les Particules* is a cleverly constructed kaleidoscopic work of chronological shifts and leaps. It is also, in places, a very funny book. For more than one reason, the author Houellebecq most brings to mind is Céline; as in *Journey to the End of the Night*, Houellebecq here interleaves passages of despair and selfloathing with episodes of tenderness and pathos.

The novel begins with a prologue, in which we are told that humanity has recently undergone its third, and most radical, metaphysical mutation, following those effected by Christianity and modern science, and that one of the architects of this mutation was Michel Djerzinski, at the time of his death a biologist of great reputation, in line for the Nobel Prize. (The accusations of Stalinism levelled against Houellebecq were prompted by his choice of the name Djerzinski - also the name of one of Stalin's show-trial interrogators; Houellebecq claims that he merely likes Polish-sounding names, and that, anyway, Stalin did the right thing in getting rid of a few troublesome anarchists.)

The story itself opens in July 1998, at which point Djerzinski is forty. A researcher in molecular biology, he has just handed in his notice after fifteen years at the prestigious Centre national de la recherche scientifique in Paris. He gives no explanation to his superior, beyond expressing the need for time "to think". He fears life, and takes refuge from it behind a positivist screen of certainties, and in rereading Heisenberg's autobiography. Unmarried and unattached, Michel (who lost his virginity at the age of thirty) feels incapable of loving and has low sex drive, unlike his forty-two-year-old half-brother Bruno, who is obsessed with sex. Bruno teaches in a *lycée* and still has aspirations to be a writer. In Michel's view, Bruno is approaching a mid-life crisis (he has started wearing a leather coat and talking like a character in a second-rate thriller). Michel is suffering from something worse - no will to live.

Their mother, Janine, lives the ideals of the permissive society to the full. Born in 1920, she grew up in Algeria (where her father went to work as an engineer) and came to Paris to complete her studies; she bebopped with Sartre (whom she found strikingly ugly), had many lovers (she was very beautiful) and married a virile young surgeon who was to make a fortune in the relatively new field of plastic surgery (a profession no doubt intended to epitomize the shallowness of the age). The couple divorced two years after Bruno was born, and both he and, later, Michel, were dumped on long-suffering grandparents - Janine goes to live in a commune in California. In harrowing flashbacks, we are shown the neglect at home and brutality at school to which Bruno and Michel were subjected in childhood. Neither, it is implied, has ever properly recovered from these beginnings.



Significant episodes in their lives are carefully linked to events in society at large : Bruno's suffering at school is made worse by the fact that, in the wake of the protests of May 68, there has been a deliberate slackening of school authority, the emphasis now being on self-discipline. Dates are employed in ironic juxtaposition too; in a characteristically Houellebecquian phrase, it is said that the year 1970 saw "une extension rapide de la consommation érotique" (an explosion in the number of sex shops in Paris, and so on) ; in the next paragraph, we read that it was also the year in which Michel first met his childhood sweetheart, Annabelle. Their innocent romance is one of the most touching episodes in a book from which love - as opposed to sex - is largely absent. Michel, however, sees Annabelle snatched from him by the wannabe rock-star son of one of Janine's Californian lovers. Annabelle and Michel don't meet again until a chance encounter when they are both forty; in the intervening years, she has taken part in orgies and had two abortions, while Michel has buried himself in research. Their attempt to rebuild what they lost is hampered by Michel's emotional coldness; he feels compassion for her, but no love.

Where the placid Michel provokes pity, Bruno is a troubling figure, a pornographer of the first rank, whose activities are underpinned by lengthy disquisitions on consumer-driven sex. The debris of his life is largely stitched together in confessional sessions with Michel ("J'étais un salaud; je savais que j'étais un salaud") and with various psychiatrists. We learn that, as a teenager, Bruno used to masturbate secretly while sitting on the train from school within touching distance of a pretty girl. Pitched into his mother's bohemian household for the summer holidays as a pale and already overweight eighteen-year-old, he felt self-conscious and inadequate in the presence of his mother's tanned hippie lovers, and in the face of his mother's eagerness to discuss his sexual inhibitions. The hatred Bruno nurses for Janine finds its expression years later, when he hurls abuse at her as she lies on her death-bed.

Bruno does not spare himself in presenting his catalogue of iniquities: as a thirty-five-year-old lycée teacher in Dijon, on the brink of divorce and with a baby son, he goes out nightclubbing on a hopeless quest for sex, when his wife is away and he is supposed to be looking after their son; at other times, he surfs the Internet for porn (as a result, he receives a telephone bill for 14,000 francs, which he hides from his wife). Dangerously attracted to his teenage pupils, he provokes the black boyfriend of one of them into retaliatory taunts. In a fit of jealous rage, Bruno fires off a racist tract to L'Infini, a journal edited by the maverick writer Philippe Sollers. The two meet in a Paris café, Sollers brandishing his cigarette holder (Houellebecq paints an insolently unflattering portrait); Sollers thinks better of publishing the piece, and Bruno throws it away, acknowledging it to be an "absurdity". This episode, which prompted the accusations of racism against the author, is clearly intended to show Bruno's loosening grip on reality; a further incident with a female pupil leads him to seek psychiatric help.

Bruno almost discovers the possibilities of love when he meets Christiane at a New Age camp site in the south of France called Lieu du Changement (the name of a real camp site, whose owner tried unsuccessfully to sue Houellebecq). The site is run by former *soixante-huitards* and its West Coast vapidity is cruelly satirized: the personal development workshop, "Dansez votre job"; the signs nailed to the trees with the legend "RESPECT MUTUEL". The forty-two-year-old Bruno is shameless in his reasons for spending two weeks in an

environment whose ethics he despises; like Christiane, who is forty-five, and the divorced mother of a teenage son, he has gone there for sex. For her, the ravages of the generation of 68 are plain to see, as she says, of the women who participate in the workshops: "En général elles ont fait une analyse, ça les a complètement séchées."

Christiane takes Bruno on a relentless voyage of depravity - group sex with German tourists, orgies in lowlife Paris night clubs. It seems curiously paradoxical that a book which sets itself up as an attack on the permissiveness of the 1960s should itself be so full of graphic descriptions of sex, but then that is no doubt part of Houellebecq's scheme. And there is a bleak determinism in the fact that Christiane, like Annabelle, doesn't survive the story (Annabelle dies of cancer, whereas Christiane commits suicide).

In the final part of the book, we find Michel at the Centre for Genetic Research in Galway (there are some fine descriptions of the Irish landscape); his life is given new impetus by a revolutionary theory he has been developing: convinced that the human race has become exhausted by its pursuit of individualism and sexual gratification, he works on a blueprint for a genetically modified race, of uniform personality and without sex drive. His work, which is taken forward after his death in the year 2009, leads to nothing less than the creation, in 2029, of a genetically controlled race, and the eventual extinction of man. Most reviewers would not be qualified to comment on Houellebecq's theories of gene mutation, but it is worth noting that the author felt confident enough to send copies of his book to experts in the field. It emerges that the story we have been reading was written by a clone, in homage to the flawed human race; the significance of the prologue becomes clear.

Not since Michel Tournier's *The Erl-King* (1970) has French fiction produced a novel as unsettling, or as rich in ideas, as *Les Particules élémentaires*. It is a novel which sets out to provoke and upset, and yet does not try to outsmart its readers (Houellebecq is not the sort of ludic writer British readers expect the French to be). Written in a straightforward style, it has a confident, reassuring narrative sweep. The book is currently being translated into English, and demands to be read.

Houellebecq's first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, sketched some of the themes developed in *Particules élémentaires*. On the cover of the English version, *Whatever*, Tibor Fischer hails it as "*L'Etranger* for the info generation". The book does have echoes of Camus's novella, most obviously in its description of a botched attempt at a murder on a beach (although in Houellebecq's book there is a motive of sorts), but also in its sour, laconic tone, and in the moral torpor of its narrator, a thirty-year-old computer programmer; unambiguous and disaffected, suffering from (useless) information overload, he appears to have no friends or family. Split up from his girlfriend two years ago, he spends his weekends getting "gently depressed" and working on his "animal dialogues" (clever parodies of Sartre at his most philosophically opaque). We get a grim picture of his working environment, peopled by social misfits (he is on an assignment at the Ministry of Agriculture) who spend their time regurgitating bureaucratic jargon, or exchanging dirty stories by the coffee machine.

On a business trip to Rouen, he is accompanied by a colleague, Tisserand, who wastes his time in increasingly hopeless attempts to seduce young women. One night, the narrator urges him to exact the worst possible revenge on an attractive young couple who are heading to the beach, with the clear intention of having sex. Tisserand watches them, but draws back from wielding the knife the narrator has provided, consoling himself by masturbating in the sand dunes.

In the competition for sex, Tisserand is clearly a loser; so much so that the narrator develops a theory around him: sexual liberalism can be equated with economic liberalism; both create unfair competition (in the economic sphere, Tisserand is a winner), and both lead to "l'extension du domaine de la lutte" (the French title). This is either ingenious or pretentious, but the reference is lost in the flip American-English title. Elsewhere, the translation seems a little stiff in places, as in the rendition of the sentence "Au fond, il n'est pas tellement à plaindre, ce bon Bernard, ce cher Bernard": "At bottom, he isn't so much to be pitied, this good Bernard, this dear Bernard." As for slang, of which there is a great deal, it rarely sounds natural in translation, and here is no exception. But, overall, Paul Hammond adequately conveys the caustic flavour of the original.

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