



Books

The Possibility of a Pornographic Moralist

Caustic, excessive, self-loathing French author Michel Houellebecq skewers Western civilization

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BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY:

The Possibility of an Island
by Michel Houellebecq
Translated by Gavin Bowd
Alfred A. Knopf, 2006
352 pp., \$33

Platform
by Michel Houellebecq
Translated by Frank Wynne
Vintage Books, 2004
259 pp., \$21

The Elementary Particles
by Michel Houellebecq
Translated by Frank Wynne
Vintage Books, 2001
264 pp., \$21

Michel Houellebecq on principles: "I had to stick to my 'liberal humanist' position; I knew in my heart it was my only chance of getting laid." On family: "The couple quickly realized that the burden of caring for a small child was incompatible with their ideal of personal freedom." On the French president: "He seemed to be such an idiot, it was affecting the country's image." On 1960s feminists: "Their mature years brought only failure, masturbation, and shame." On Québécois tourists: "They were thick-set and tough, all teeth and blubber, talking incredibly loudly." On what all men want: "little sluts who are innocent but ready for all forms of depravity." On the United States: "If ever

there was a country in need of sex tourism, it's theirs." On Muslims... well, it's probably for the best that Islamic fundamentalists don't follow French novelists too closely these days. For readers who do, however, Michel Houellebecq never fails to win attention for his blunt excoriations of late Western civilization. His books, which are endlessly obsessed over in Paris, abound in self-loathing, raw comedy, caustic opinion, and downcast introspection—in short, they veer between self-exhibition and outrageous moralizing.

Houellebecq is only the latest in a line of writers who have seized on elegant hypocrisy, slothful consensus, and soft-boiled thinking as the unnoticed debilitations of smugly superior

societies. The French seem particularly adept at inspiring and sustaining such work. Montaigne, Molière, Voltaire, Diderot, Stendhal, and, more recently, Camus and Sartre have variously undercut café society with satire, irony, and outright provocation, while invariably winning admiration for their efforts from the very circles they attacked. In this co-dependency, two elements underlie the sundry engagements of these very different writers: first, a strong moral awareness that things have gone awry in times when the general feeling is triumphant; second, a willingness—whether gleeful or masochistic or both—to be unremitting and fearless in the ensuing critique. As part of this tradition, Houellebecq reads like an aggressive moralist for the well-to-do ranks of the contemporary West. Beneath their self-congratulatory poses, Houellebecq's characters are driven by the all-conquering libidos and congenital selfishness unleashed by the 1960s, and these glorious freedoms leave them desperate to find more in life than new sexual positions and interesting Chardonnays.

In Houellebecq's fashioning, these characters are the elite members of a society that has, on the whole, lost its sense of how and why life ought to matter, having warded off such questions through an onslaught of passing pleasures—shopping, travel, antidepressants, assorted cheap orgasms. As can be the case with satirists, Houellebecq uses broad strokes when creating a cultural landscape he only intends to assault, and his critiques are too often crowded out by the zeal with which he imagines them. Much of his fiction consists of nasty swipes and nastier sex scenes, and at times it reads like little more than a French mélange of Lenny Bruce and *Penthouse Forum*. But Houellebecq's hysterical and rancid assaults can also be taken as evidence of the extremes to which one must go these days to attack Progress and its sidekick Tolerance, our preferred shibboleths for dealing with moral, political, economic, and technological problems.

Houellebecq first won notice with *The Elementary Particles*, his 1998 novel about half-brothers Bruno and

Michel who come of age in the wake of the social revolutions of the 1960s and then conduct parallel searches for love and fulfillment, only to find their initial flaws merely enhanced and rewarded by the culture around them. Bruno, an unpopular, unattractive boy with raging hormones and low ambition, becomes an Olympic libertine and a professional failure. He devotes himself to gorging on mouthfuls of flesh and drink, which are all the more easy to come by after the sexual revolution. So too are the mediocre civil-servant day jobs that Bruno slouches through between orgies, as the novel traces out how the May '68 generation transformed itself into France's self-serving ruling class.

Michel, an introvert unconcerned about bodily desires and prone to showy feats of theoretical abstraction, becomes an internationally renowned molecular biologist. Though beset by existential angst, he has little trouble inserting himself into the arid order and hyper-specializations of the genetic-research circuit, where human contact need never involve more than shop