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# France's philosopher king

*There is a jarring disconnect between Michel Houellebecq's critiques* of sexual liberation and his dissolute lifestyle

#### FEATURES By Laurent Lemasson December-January 2024

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person's literary talents do not seem to bear any direct relation to their human qualities. More precisely, the value of a work, its depth as well as its beauty, cannot be judged by the life of the person who wrote it — even when the work has obvious biographical resonances.

Those who refuse to read *Émile* on the grounds that Jean-Jacques Rousseau abandoned his children are depriving themselves of a work that has very few equivalents in the entire history of Western literature and philosophy, and which can rival Plato's Republic.

Properly understood, "separate the man from the author" is a rather wise maxim. We would do well to bear it in mind when reading Michel Houellebecq's latest work: Quelques mois dans ma vie (A Few Months in My Life).

Michel Houellebecq is not, for the moment at least, this century's Proust, Céline or Faulkner. Nevertheless, he is unquestionably one of the most important French novelists of the last 50 years. His work has been translated into more than 40 languages, and at the age of 67 he is probably the bestknown living French author in the world. His latest novel, Anéantir (2022), sold 300,000 copies in its first edition alone.

This success is not undeserved as his novels, essays and poetry, which Houellebecq himself considers to be the most important part of his oeuvre, are undeniably powerful. He describes himself as a painter of the "slackening" (avachissement) of Western man at the start of the twenty-first century, and is at his best when dissecting the emotional and sexual misery of his contemporaries.

Through his eight novels published to date, as well as an assortment of articles collected in two volumes entitled Intervention, Houellebecq has explored a number of themes and offered interesting analyses on many subjects (sex tourism; the death of the French peasantry; transhumanism; euthanasia; the Islamisation of France).

But the essence of his work, what makes it so strong and interesting, was already to be found in his first novel, Extension du domaine de la lutte (1994).

*Extension*'s narrator is a computer technician in his thirties who gradually sinks into depression. The "gradual erasure of human relationships poses certain problems for the novel" he concedes, for "the novel form is not designed to depict indifference or nothingness; it would be necessary to invent a flatter, more concise and drearier structure".

This impossibility of forming authentic human bonds, the radical solitude of modern man, is certainly not a new theme. It forms the backdrop to Louis-Ferdinand Céline's 1932 novel Voyage au bout de la nuit and can be discerned in Flaubert's L'Education sentimentale (1869). But Houellebecq has succeeded in renewing it, in particular by inventing a style he feels is necessary to portray the nothingness he sees at the heart of our lives: a flat, concise, dreary style that exudes a sticky despair but is not without a certain caustic humour.

A second theme that runs through all his work, and which is obviously linked to the first, is the devastation wrought by the sexual liberation of the 1960s. The disillusioned reflections of Extension's narrator lead him to this oft-quoted

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conclusion:

In a perfectly liberal economic system, some people accumulate considerable fortunes; others languish in unemployment and misery. In a perfectly liberal sexual system, some people have a varied and exciting erotic life; others are reduced to masturbation and solitude. Economic liberalism means extending the field of struggle to all ages and all classes of society. In the same way, sexual liberalism is the extension of the field of struggle, its extension to all stages of life and to all classes of society.

You don't have to agree with the first part of the proposition concerning economic liberalism to see, as Houellebecq does through his character, that the liberation of morals has not led to the promised happiness, but rather to immense confusion and a great deal of involuntary solitude.

This observation about the evils and inequalities of sexual liberalism should be read in conjunction with another, made towards the end of the novel:

Véronique had known too many nightclubs and too many lovers; such a way of life impoverishes human beings, inflicting sometimes serious and always irreversible damage. Love as innocence and capacity for illusion, as the ability to summarise the whole of the other sex in a single loved one, rarely survives a year of sexual vagrancy, never two.

In his subsequent writings, Houellebecq has expanded on these assertions, qualified and enriched them, but he has never denied them. Which makes him one of the pet peeves of contemporary feminists, or perhaps it should be said that contemporary feminists are among his pet peeves, to whom he rarely fails to hurl a few sharp jabs.

One of contemporary feminism's strictures is that women can only be fully emancipated when they are capable of behaving sexually with a "manly independence", as Simone de Beauvoir put it: in other words, of being as promiscuous as men (or as feminists imagine men to be). Houellebecq has not shied away from saying he considers this idea profoundly stupid.

These features of Houellebecq's writing make it all the more strange to read Quelques mois dans ma vie, a short text in which Houellebecq describes how his life became "a living hell" from autumn 2022 onwards, after he gave an interview to a magazine called *Front populaire* and starred in a pornographic film.

In the *Front populaire* interview, Houellebecq gave free rein to his deep distrust of Islam, which he has expressed many times (in his third novel, Plateforme, published in 2001, the narrator's father was killed by a Muslim because he had slept with his sister, and Valérie, his great love, was killed in an Islamist attack in Thailand). These unfriendly remarks earned him threats of legal action from the rector of the Grande Mosquée de Paris, as well as violent attacks from a section of the French media. In Quelques mois dans ma vie, Houellebecq sets out to make amends, acknowledging his "stupidity" and rewording his remarks to make them much more inoffensive.

This part of the book hardly deserves much attention. It is clear the author is afraid. He is trying to avoid trouble with French law, which criminalises these kinds of comments as "incitement to racial



hatred" but also fears what fate may befall a public figure who "disrespects" Islam.

You can forgive a lot of things from a man who admits his fear of a proven danger, particularly as Houellebecq has never claimed to be a courageous man. Yet this sad palinody occupies very little space in Quelques mois dans ma vie, which is mostly devoted to his run-ins with the obscure Dutch film director Stefan Ruitenbeek.

We learn that Houellebecq had been persuaded by Ruitenbeek to make a pornographic film, but that he had failed to read the contract carefully enough. The author thought he had agreed to appear in the film, along with his wife, "subject to their anonymity being preserved".

This, of course, was not the case. Nor had he taken into account that the contract gave the director complete freedom to exploit the images. In short, Michel Houellebecq realised a little too late that he was on his way to becoming an international porn star as well as a world-famous writer. Or more accurately, that he was going to become an international porn star because he is a world-famous writer.

Even a not particularly intelligent twelve-year-old would have realised that Stefan Ruitenbeek wanted to make a pornographic film with Houellebecq in order to exploit the latter's literary fame, and that it was therefore highly unlikely that he would remain anonymous. A twelve-year-old child, but not Michel Houellebecq.

**66** A twelve-year-old child, but not **Michel** Houellebecq

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And what was it that convinced the great writer in his mid-sixties to put himself in such an embarrassing situation? Quite simply the prospect of having some fresh meat to sink his teeth into.

We learn that Michel Houellebecq is fond of having two women in his bed and that he is, obviously, always on the lookout for new threesome partners. Houellebecq also tells us he had long wanted to make pornographic videos with his wife "for private purposes". But, he explains at length, it's impossible to achieve a satisfactory result without the help of a third party, preferably someone with experience of cinema ... which is what Stefan Ruitenbeek offered. Et voilà!

Houellebecq's convoluted explanations about the need to be filmed by others in order to make videos "for private purposes" are even less convincing than his explanations about what he "really" meant to say about Islam. For anyone who appreciates Houellebecq's work, Quelques mois dans ma vie is a pretty painful read. Everything that makes his novels or articles so interesting is conspicuously absent: there is no finesse, no humour, no interesting observations, no self-mockery, nothing but a dull and slightly repulsive account of the trials and tribulations of a libidinous sexagenarian who presents himself as a victim but who, in reality, is largely punished by where he has sinned.

Reading his laborious justifications, it's hard not to agree with him when, several times in the book, he accuses himself of being "stupid". In fact, he is doubly so: for having made a pornographic film that could never have been kept private, and for not understanding that Quelques mois dans ma vie, far from dispelling the malaise, would, on the contrary, reinforce it.

Yet Houellebecq's entire body of work proves, beyond any doubt, that he is far from stupid. How, then, is it possible for him to fall so far below his usual level of intelligence?

The problem, apparently, is that the author fails to apply to his own life the perceptive observations with which he fills his novels. Houellebecq describes the evils of sexual vagrancy in his characters, but he himself practices it extensively: marital fidelity, he explains, is an "extreme" attitude, and one he is careful to avoid.

He considers modesty to be "a murky sentiment whose disappearance would be rather desirable". In his view, exhibitionism is an act of generosity, even something "admirable"; being a prostitute is an "honourable and noble" profession; pornography is "innocent entertainment", because "normal" sexuality has nothing to do with evil. In fact, sexuality and morality are "two geometrical figures" that cannot be made to coincide, and sexuality has been "the greatest joy" of his life.

In short, when it comes to himself, Michel Houellebecq seems to adhere totally to the hippy nonsense about free love, innocent sexuality, sexual pleasure as the summit of existence and the rest of the shibboleths he so cruelly mocks in Les particules élémentaires.

Yet Houellebecq says that, when he realised that images of his coitus were going to be broadcast without his consent, he felt something similar to what women who have been raped describe: "First of all, a painful sensation of dispossession of one's own body, a dull hostility towards it, a desire to punish it ... I was traversed by waves of impotent rage, but sometimes I also cowered, pierced by shame".

But isn't it strange that stolen sexual images could trigger such a reaction? Would he have felt the same shame and rage if he had been filmed without his knowledge in a restaurant or in his kitchen?

Or are these extreme feelings of anger and self-loathing an indication that sexuality is not an activity like any other? That, perhaps, sexuality is intrinsically linked to the human sense of shame and that, consequently, modesty, far from being a "murky" and useless feeling, is, for us, natural and appropriate? From which it would follow that exhibitionism is a perversion of human sexuality, prostitution a despicable activity, pornography anything but innocent entertainment, and so on.

These considerations seem elementary, and it's hard to imagine why they never occurred to Michel Houellebecq. But, to paraphrase The Federalist, it is very difficult to make a man understand something when his pleasures depend on his not understanding it.

Reading Quelques mois dans ma vie reminded me of a public debate on the theme of "Europe" I attended a few years ago, in which Houellebecq was one of the protagonists. At one point, he asked the question: "Was it better before?" He didn't have a definite answer, but added: "What I am sure of is that things were more interesting before. Life was more interesting. People were more interesting."

He undoubtedly knows that if "people were more interesting before", it's because "before" people were less pure individuals. "Before", human beings were still, at least to some extent, citizens, Christians, fathers, mothers and so forth. "Before" people were less morally sluggish: they still took their civic, family and marital duties seriously, they still feared hell a little and, for some of them at least, aspired to the salvation of their souls.

But Houellebecq, like the characters in his novels, can't believe in God, the

fatherland, virtue or the family — all the things that used to make people more interesting.

"It's absurd to say that without Europe we'd have war," he added in the same debate. "Nobody wants to go to war any more. Nobody wants war any more. I for one know that, if someone had said to me when I was young: 'You're going to go to the war for your country,' I would have run away!"

In reality, if France had gone to war, the most likely outcome would have been that young Michel would have answered the call, willingly or unwillingly, like other young people of his generation who had no more desire to go to war than he did. And perhaps he would even have died with honours. Like many other young men who, like him, thought they were neither particularly brave nor particularly patriotic before the decisive moment came.

But Houellebecq says publicly that he would have run away. Because virtue and duty seem to him to be murky notions and because he really doesn't want to be obliged to try to be brave. Also because he can't quite take national belonging seriously, even though he sincerely regrets the disappearance of nations.

There is, of course, a direct link between this "I would have run away" and "people were more interesting before". Houellebecq deplores the fact that life and people are becoming less interesting, and he paints a remarkable picture of this gradual loss of substance in human relations, this snow of ashes that is gradually suffocating the West. But through the outré portrayal he gives of this phenomenon in his books, and through his public statements, he helps to accentuate the phenomenon.

You could say that, by making life easier for himself individually (because it's certainly easier to slouch than to stand up straight), he is helping to make life less interesting collectively, and therefore his own in particular.

Quelques mois dans ma vie is certainly not a piece of writing that does Houellebecq any credit, and it may well be that, deep down, he is already beginning to regret having published it.

However, this mediocre piece of writing does have one conspicuous merit. We already knew it was wise to separate the man from the author, but now we have learned that, strangely enough, there are sometimes important things the author knows that the man himself does not.

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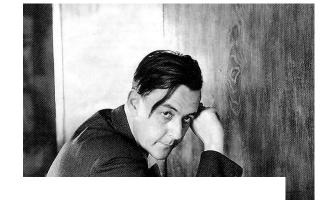
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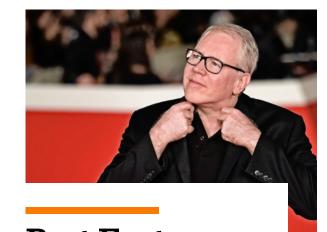
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