

Michel Houellebecq is an ugly writer, vulgar, often silly, sex-obsessed. His heroes are unprepossessing loners, eaters of junk food and watchers of far too much television, and generally, egotistically, they are named Michel. His settings are dreary suburban offices and studio apartments, with the addition, in the present novel, of airports, planes and holiday resorts in Thailand. The sex, the politics, the theorizing are inexorable, and often unpleasant to an extreme: in his current volume, strong views are expressed on topics like interracial sexual attraction, Islam, Cuba and leisure marketing in developing countries. "All humanity instinctively tends toward

miscegenation "-- this is one of the more striking aperçus in "Platform"-- and "the only person, however, to have pushed the process to its logical conclusion is Michael Jackson.'" "What does God compare to?" -- and here is another one. The answer: a woman's private parts, of course, "but also perhaps the vapors of a Turkish bath."



Michel Houellebecq inviting a literary journalist
(*photograph : Pascal Baril Corbis/Sygma*)

Which is why, as will I hope be apparent, Houellebecq can also be a terrific writer, funny and prophetic, more feverishly alive to the world around him than are many authors more tasteful, less offensive, less willing to take risks. His first novel, "L'Extension du Domaine de la Lutte" -- curtly renamed "Whatever" in its English translation -- gave startling voice to a new sort of Frenchman, a 21st-century version of the old-style Russian superfluous man, overeducated, overpaid and bored rancid by his nonexistent love life. His second, "The Elementary Particles," was even more rancorous and misanthropic, and ruthlessly captured the range and confusion of our civilization's most up-to-the-minute griefs and dreads. Why do we feel so bad all the time -- is it our genes, or cancer, or collagen? Is it monotheism, or our parents, or the collapse into self-indulgence of the dreams of the 1960's?

Houellebecq's third novel, "Platform," was published in France in 2001. This Michel is 40, and shortly after his father's murder (by a North African man, thus inducing some weary parodying of Camus) he decides to go global, dragging his decadent European self around Thailand on a package tour. There, he happens upon two important revelations. Crowd-watching in Patong, he sees handsome Australians, German lesbians and Arabs in kaffiyeh renting the attentions of cheap young Asian women. Sex tourism, he realizes, is the service industry to end all service industries, and as such, a key to the future of the world. Then he meets Valerie, a pretty young Frenchwoman with a high-flying job in the travel business. Remarkably, Valerie turns out to be "a radiant exception": a Western woman who not only enjoys sex and gives it freely but for some reason wants especially to give it to Michel.

And so, by way of many sex scenes, we come to the central argument of the book. What with their increased prosperity, education and so on, Western women no longer want anything to do with the average plain and boring little Western man, and what with their concomitant neuroses, insecurity and baggage, they are no longer capable of merely enjoying sex. Women in developing countries, on the other hand, still think of sex as life's great free gift, and are frankly overjoyed to get their hands on a nice chap willing to pay them for it. It's a global economy version of the Modest Proposal: the money-spinning potential is "almost unimaginable, vastly more than from computers or biotechnology," as Michel says. Michel and Valerie team up, as lovers and as colleagues, planning to transform the tourist industry with their chain of sex resorts. It all goes swimmingly, and with an added bonus: Valerie and Michel really do seem, in their own profane and rather pathetic way, to fall in love.

Now obviously, the picture of sex tourism presented in this novel is a caricature, grotesquely idealized. And yet Houellebecq is also onto something real and true and awful about 21st-century men and women, abandon and repression and rich countries and poor countries in the brave new global world. "Like all of the inhabitants of Western Europe, I want to travel," Michel says. "What I really want, basically, is to be a tourist. We dream what dreams we can afford." In his sympathetic translation, Frank Wynne has wittily asterisked and italicized all the words that appeared in English in the original French text: breakfast coupons, body massage, go-go bars, fun, dress code, gay-friendly, topless, coffee shop, ghetto blaster. They do not make the international leisure industry sound edifying, and I don't think this is entirely Houellebecq's fault.

But Houellebecq's ideas unravel around the aspect of the novel that has attracted the most attention -- its lambasting of Islam, a civilization, like that of Europe, precariously poised on the major fault lines of our time. This is a book that, although published long before Bali and just before 9/11, contains within it a vicious bomb attack by a gang of Muslim terrorists on a beach resort in Thailand. And this is a book that contains within it several equally vicious anti-Muslim rants. "Muslims on the whole aren't worth much," the narrator mutters, then has a vision of "migratory flows crisscrossing Europe like blood vessels, in which Muslims appeared as clots that were only slowly reabsorbed." "Do you know what I call Muslims? The losers of the Sahara," a friendly Egyptian man is wheeled in for a scene to say.

Now, it is possible to imagine how a courageous writer might build some sort of tense, dynamic structure within which global tourism, sexual frustration and the lovelessness of the West were indeed counterposed with the emergence of radical Islam. And once or twice in "Platform" Houellebecq starts to have an almost-interesting thought. For example, a kindly Jordanian banker pops up to tell us that Islam is doomed because capitalism has hijacked its most holy imagery and turned it into tourist schlock: "The problem with Muslims . . . was that the paradise promised by the Prophet already existed here on earth. There were places on earth where young, available, lascivious girls danced for the pleasure of men, where one could become drunk on nectar and listen to celestial music ; there were about 20 of them within 500 meters of our hotel."

But to investigate such ideas properly would take more work, it seems, than Houellebecq was prepared to do. In "The Elementary Particles," shrewd links were proposed between sexual liberation and spiritual emptiness, Judeo-Christianity and genetic manipulation. But the attack on Islam in "Platform," I'm afraid, pivots around such lazy prejudices as that it is a religion "born in a stupid desert, among filthy Bedouin" who had nothing better to do than have sex with their camels. In "The Elementary Particles," the speculative arc that begins in seemingly routine accounts of molecular biology is so cunningly put together that it becomes impossible to pinpoint where science fact gives way, sublimely, to what the author calls a "metaphysical mutation." In "Platform," the attacks on religion are contained in unintegrated slabs of rant.

IS it fair to demand of novels that they be articulate and reasonable, that they attempt in some way to make the world a better place? If so, "Platform" is a disaster, poorly organized and incoherent and rather crass. Its notion that swinging sex is somehow redemptive is the stuff not even of adult fantasy -- it is too naive, too embarrassingly infantile, for that. Its politics are reactionary and xenophobic -- that Houellebecq doesn't think much of his own countrymen either isn't much of a defense -- and the annoying way that most of the nasty digs at Muslims are put in the mouths of friendly Arabs is reminiscent of no one so much as Pim Fortuyn, the anti-immigration Dutch politician who famously asserted, shortly before his assassination last year, that far from hating Arabs, he liked sleeping with them. Racism, like everything else, has shifted its shape with the changing world order, and is as likely these days to come in a libertine wrapper as any other.

Is it fair to demand of novels that they be articulate and reasonable -- or is it as important, sometimes, that what they are trying to say is real and new? If nothing else, "Platform" makes an imaginative purchase on an undeniably actual strand of thought in turn-of-the-century Europe, a continent that feels itself, as "The Elementary Particles" puts it, to be "sliding slowly, ineluctably, into the ranks of the less developed countries." "In most circumstances in my life," Michel confesses at one point, "I have had about as much freedom as has a vacuum cleaner" -- not a noble thought, or one that lends much hope to the future. But it is apt and it is funny, and it is, unfortunately, likely to be true.

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