

Writer's Block

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The Possibility of an Island

By Michel Houellebecq

Knopf, 337 pages, \$24.95

The French writer Michel Houellebecq first came to the attention of English-language readers in 2000, with the publication of "The Elementary Particles." A startling novel, it traced the lives of half-brothers, a libertine and a scientist. Among much else, they seemed to serve as emblems of two self-destructive tendencies in modern life: radical individual autonomy and technological perfection.

Sexually graphic, philosophical and disturbing, "The Elementary Particles" portrayed the countercultural "liberation" of the 1960s as something that assaulted social norms so violently that its logical conclusion, years later, was physical violence and a hyper-cerebral brutality against mankind. The barbarity, in Mr. Houellebecq's world, took the form of the cold rationalism of eugenics. Its aim was to produce a society of clones to achieve, as one character puts it, "our idea of heaven: genetic manipulation, sexual liberation, the war against aging, the leisure society."

Mr. Houellebecq's next books continued to sound such themes. "Platform" (2002) was a particularly raw depiction of an almost insensate pleasure-seeker who ranged across the globe in an orgy of "sex tourism." The book was pornographic in its detail and mechanistic, at best, in its attitudes toward women. Hedonism was its ostensible subject; unhappiness was its actual one.

It is obviously hard to categorize Mr. Houellebecq as a literary figure, or as a public persona: In interviews and profiles -- he now lives in Ireland -- he comes across as louche, provocative and surly. In 2001, he called Islam "the dumbest religion" and was hauled into French court for inciting religious hatred (he was acquitted). Is he a drunken misanthrope or fascistic misogynist, as critics have alleged, or a neo-existential thinker with a knack for making omens about the West's excesses dramatically compelling? Or is he all of the above?

"The Possibility of an Island" (translated by Gavin Bowd) offers some clues. Here again we see Mr. Houellebecq's concern for the effects of individualism, materialism and science run amok. The novel's chapters alternate between the story of a

character called Daniel1, set in the near future, and the story of his clones, Daniel24 and Daniel25, set in a distant time.

Daniel1 is a kind of male Emma Bovary, groping for meaning, sexually insatiable and perched on the brink of suicide. A Euro-millionaire and stand-up comedian, he behaves "like a complete bastard," telling the truth with an "abnormal frankness." The more he insults the public, the more he profits from his own depravity and that of the culture around him.

He can't remember why he married his wife (whom he leaves) or why he never loved their child (who commits suicide). Amid such apparent numbness, Daniel1 ponders the "disappearance of religions, the difficulty of feeling love ... the loss of our sense of the sacred [and] the crumbling of social ties." As if to illustrate the point, his new love interest, Isabelle, edits a magazine called Lolita, which targets 10-year-old girls and fills its pages with hot pants and tight T-shirts. It is the kind of publication, she concedes, that will help to create "an artificial mankind ... which, until it dies, will engage in an increasingly desperate quest for *fun* and sex; a generation of definitive *kids*."

Daniel1 falls into this vortex himself. He seems to detest youth but lusts after young women. With the unconditional love of a dog his only solace, he concludes that, because of a "design flaw," the "human individual *cannot* be happy."

If "The Possibility of an Island" ended there, it would be mostly a whiny expression of ennui, leavened by a few amusing insights and coarsened by some fairly explicit sex. But Mr. Houellebecq takes another step, introducing Daniel1 to the so-called Elohimite Church. Founded by potheads in search of free love, the cult has since been taken over by megalomaniacal scientists intent on resurrecting man (à la Christ) through cloning. When the founder meets an embarrassing death, a neurology professor called "Knowall" commits a murder to cover it up and keep the cult alive. He explains that his victim was just a "temporary arrangement of molecules" and -- in a throwback to old ideologies -- that her "death has become necessary so that mankind can progress."

Clearly there is something intensely sinister about Elohimism and its biotech model for mankind, but Mr. Houellebecq has made his central character so morally inert that he cannot resist it. Thus Daniel1 does not object when the cult takes his DNA, offering him the hope of multiple reincarnations -- a nonreligious afterlife. The

"perfection" of man gets under way in earnest as the cult's neo-human clones -- equipped with photosynthesis and reduced feelings -- slowly come to replace mankind, the animal-like vestiges of which forage about in a collapsed civilization.

If this all sounds rather bleak, it is, although there is a Rousseau-ian surprise near the end of the book. "The Possibility of an Island" provides Mr. Houellebecq's most complete vision of his recurring theme: a godless modern world pre-programmed to commit suicide. It is a world populated by characters who face, at best, redundant days without love.

Much of Mr. Houellebecq's writing reads like a catalog of what John Paul II called the "culture of death": cloning, eugenics, euthanasia, Darwinist determinism, loveless sex, an alienation from nature and being. The distaste for procreation reaches its height in this novel when the Elohimites run an ad of a bawling child in a supermarket followed by the words: "Just say no. Use condoms."

Granted, popes offer hope, and Mr. Houellebecq does not. But if we ignore diagnosticians because they offer no cure, then we'd stop reading Nietzsche. And granted, the world is not coming to an end. But even a rabid optimist possessing mild powers of observation will recognize some part of what Mr. Houellebecq describes. We live at a time when the Internet streams video replays of people beating and shooting each other; when Princeton University has hired a philosophy professor who defends the killing of disabled infants; when activists scramble to keep genetically modified food out of their bodies but don't think twice about choosing the color of their children's eyes; when "neuro-ethicists" claim that morality is nothing more than chemicals in the brain. Reason has too often become an arrogant scientism that dismisses the realms beyond its reach (religion, custom, philosophical wisdom) and maintains a complete ignorance about science's own potential for evil.

This, I would say, is Mr. Houellebecq's point. For all the sophistication of our civilization, man has not changed. He cannot. His propensity for evil remains, and his own unhappiness will drive him toward it, for lack of the will -- or belief -- to resist. "The Possibility of an Island," like other books by Mr. Houellebecq, is a sharp check on our hubris, our complacent assumption that things are getting better and better. It is always worth asking whether they really are.