

The Western Abyss

Reviewed by BENJAMIN KERSTEIN

MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ
The Possibility of an Island
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Michel Houellebecq is the most hated writer in Europe, which alone ought to be proof of his importance: In an age in which the word is tyrannized by the image, accolades must be paid to a writer effective enough to be loathed.

To date, Houellebecq has won the lucrative Irish Impac and French Prix Novembre prizes, been brought to trial on charges of racist defamation, and made himself the most reviled writer in the francophone world. But Houellebecq is more than a clever pusher of politically incorrect buttons. His work constitutes a dissident manifesto, a caustic and openly despairing portrait of Europe and the West. Obsessed by money, sex, youth, and beauty, contemptuous of love in all its forms, dislocated, fragmented, and increasingly unhinged, Houellebecq's West teeters on the edge of the abyss. It is a billion unhappy souls, wandering indifferently toward self-extinction. The mere presence of a Houellebecq, it may be said, exposes the malaise that underlies the utopian pretensions of the New Europe.

For the anti-Houellebecqians, the author's scorched-earth criticism of immigration, feminism, psychiatry, globalization, and nearly everything grouped under the amorphous heading "politically correct" adds up, albeit unintentionally, to something like an ideology-one perceived as a threat by both the Left and the Right.

It is Houellebecq's luridly detailed descriptions of sexual acrobatics, his aggrandizement of prostitution, and his celebration of the biological imperative (usually in the form of middle-aged men pursuing extremely young women) that have aroused the accusation of pornography among his more strident critics. Against this accusation there can be no defense, if pornography is defined as the detailed examination of that which is normally unspoken and unseen. In any event, judging by his international sales, the audience for pornographic social commentary is far larger than the European finger wagger may imagine. Clearly, a disturbing number of Westerners hear in Houellebecq an echo of their own confusion, resentment, and disillusionment.

This collective bad mood, according to Houellebecq, has its roots in the 1960s, when revolutionaries across the West tore down social and moral constraints in the pursuit of hedonistic freedom. In France, this upheaval was consummated by the *soixante-huitards*, or '68ers, students who led the national civil disobedience movement against government malfeasance. For Houellebecq, the '68ers gave birth to a world in which people are unfettered by consequences or obligations, and enjoy not only freedom *to*, but freedom *from* marriage, family, children, and love, to name a few. Modern life, charges Houellebecq, has become an impossible race toward conscienceless pleasure. For the majority of humanity, the result is an existence that is desperate, alienated, hopeless, and inhuman.

Houellebecq's autobiography, aspects of which appear constantly in his books, reads like a legacy of the 1960s in microcosm, the cost of social revolution encapsulated in a single life. Born in 1958 on the island of Reunion, an East African possession of the dying French empire, Houellebecq was abandoned at the age of three by parents determined to live the life of ideological hedonism. Raised by his grandmother, educated in the elite French system, then career-tracked into an undemanding job debugging computers for the Agriculture Ministry, for most of his life Houellebecq was, in every way, a mediocre scion of the French white-collar elite. He suffered periodic bouts of depression, however, for which he was eventually hospitalized. He married, unsuccessfully, and fathered a son from whom he is now as estranged as he is from his own parents. By the time he reached his thirties, Houellebecq was mired in the lonely, unhappy life he catalogs in his work. It was at this point, however, that Houellebecq turned himself from victim into witness, and then into rebel. In short, he began to write.

His first book-length work, *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*, little noticed outside France and only recently published in English, reads like a coalescent moment before the full eruption. The seeds of Houellebecq's later works are all there, in *Against the World's* amniotic prose; single sentences soon evolved into full novels. Even the strange expression "the elementary particles"-later the title of the novel that made him famous-appears for a brief moment, almost as an afterthought.

The subject of *Against the World*, the American pulp horror writer Howard Phillips Lovecraft, was a reclusive, puritanical, unapologetically racist spinner of "weird tales" who wrote of terrifying encounters with ancient and otherworldly creatures in a deliberately archaic, phantasmagoric style. Writing in the 1920s and 1930s, Lovecraft died young, unknown, and nearly penniless, but has since spawned a cult of readers and imitators, including some of the best genre writers of the twentieth century. Indeed, *Against the World* may well be the first and last essay by a French intellectual to open with an introduction (and not a bad one) by Stephen King.

We should not be unduly surprised: Ever since Baudelaire first lionized Poe, the French have always displayed a talent for uncovering the esoteric virtues of American genre fiction. In the hands of Houellebecq, Lovecraft becomes not merely a master of the horror tale, but the architect of a new metaphysic, one based on the total and uncompromising rejection of life and the world. "The world sickened [Lovecraft]," writes Houellebecq, "and he saw no reason to believe that by *looking at things better* they might appear differently." For Houellebecq, this refusal to avert one's eyes from the horror that is life is the source of Lovecraft's greatness.

Yet if Houellebecq identifies with Lovecraft's horror of the world, he does not abide by the latter's abandonment of it. "Speaking for myself," Houellebecq writes in the essay's preface, "I have not adhered to Lovecraft's hatred of all forms of realism and his appalled rejection of all subjects relating to money or sex...." This much is true. Houellebecq's great virtue is his rejection of the French literary tendency toward interior psychology and his embrace of the actual world as a worthy subject of fiction. But *Against the World* reveals something beyond the dualism of realism and fantasy: The horror of Lovecraft's fantasy is the horror of Houellebecq's realism; the relationship between the two is that of prophet and journalist. Whatever the trappings of realism in Houellebecq's books, they are still tales of horror. His

work makes a terrifying assertion: A mere sixty years of human progress has brought us to the point where the unspeakable has become reportage.

Indeed, if we take Houellebecq's work as a whole, we see an unrelenting progression toward the annihilation of realism through realism. We see, in fact, Houellebecq becoming Lovecraft. Not by eschewing realism, however, but by progressively demolishing it, and transforming it from a principle into a process. In other words, we watch as Houellebecq destroys the world.

The first chapter in this processional cataclysm was published in France in 1994 under the title *Whatever*, an unfortunate substitute for Houellebecq's cumbersome original, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* ("The Extension of the Domain of the Struggle"). A scathingly funny and finally terrifying tale of a government bureaucrat, a computer programmer named-what else?-Michel, sinking into a semi-psychotic depression while on a business trip to the French countryside, Houellebecq's novella erupts with loathing and horror toward life. Observing his goodhearted but ugly co-worker fail again and again at the art of seduction, Michel formulates Houellebecq's assault on Western civilization:

It's a fact, I mused to myself, that in societies like ours sex truly represents a second system of differentiation, completely independent of money; and as a system of differentiation it functions just as mercilessly.... Just like unrestrained economic liberalism, and for similar reasons, sexual liberalism produces phenomena of *absolute pauperization*. Some men make love every day; others five or six times in their life, or never. Some make love with dozens of women; others with none. It's what's known as "the law of the market".... In a totally liberal economic system certain people accumulate considerable fortunes; others stagnate in unemployment and misery. In a totally liberal sexual system certain people have a varied and exciting erotic life; others are reduced to masturbation and solitude. Economic liberalism is an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes of society. Sexual liberalism is likewise an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes of society.... Businesses fight over certain young professionals; women fight over certain young men; men fight over certain young women; the trouble and strife are considerable.

This visceral equation-sexuality as a system of social hierarchy-is more than a satirical revision of the war between the sexes. It is, rather, the key to Houellebecq's own absolutism of despair. It is a dagger thrust into the heart of the '68 generation, striking at their greatest source of pride: The liberation of the individual from social constraints on sexuality. Far from an erotic paradise, Houellebecq's sexual revolution has created not only a world of the walking wounded, but a world in which the most intimate of human relationships has become an arena of Hobbesian brutality. It has created a life which is no longer worth living.

This manifesto for the liberation of the sexually frustrated is not merely an attack on a single generation, however. It is also an inversion of modernity's insistence that the progressive freedom of man leads to greater happiness. In Houellebecq's view, we have progressed, but we have also been reduced, decivilized, and hurled back into the unforgiving struggle for biological pleasure. Freedom, in this construct, is the reduction of man to the sum total of his genetic attributes. "We have created a system," Houellebecq is quoted in an *LA Weekly* profile, "in which it has simply become impossible to live...."

The Elementary Particles, his next work, is not so much a theory but a worldview, and ultimately a world unto itself. Published in France in 1999, it is unquestionably Houellebecq's masterpiece. It tells the tale of Bruno and Michel, half-brothers abandoned in their childhood by parents who, like Houellebecq's, preferred sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll to the banality of child-rearing. Michel, a renowned biologist who is emotionally incapable of love, and Bruno, a perpetual failure obsessed with sex, are forced to live out their lives among the detritus of a civilization destroyed by the parents they barely knew. But unlike Houellebecq's previous novel, this is not merely a tale of individuals. Here Houellebecq asserts the universality of their condition:

This book is principally the story of a man who lived out the greater part of his life in Western Europe.... He lived through an age that was miserable and troubled... often haunted by misery, the men of his generation lived out their lonely, bitter lives. Feelings such as love, tenderness, and human fellowship had, for the most part, disappeared; the relationships between his contemporaries were at best indifferent and often cruel.

Bruno's and Michel's search for something of value in an inhuman age is fruitless; they capture only fleeting moments of comfort and happiness before even these are shorn away by the raw force of a society that despises life. Michel disappears into his work, submitting only briefly to the love of Annabelle, his childhood sweetheart, whose own capacity for love could not save her.

"I haven't really had a happy life," said Annabelle, "I think I was too obsessed by love.... It took me years to come to terms with the cliché that men don't make love because they're in love, they do it because they're turned on. Everyone around me knew that and lived like that-I grew up in a pretty liberal environment-but I never enjoyed the game for its own sake. In the end, even the sex started to disgust me.... It was too hurtful to know they thought of me as just another piece of meat.

Annabelle clings to Michel, a man who cannot love, as her only hope for redemption. In the end, however, her sacrifice saves no one; history is arrayed against her. "In the midst of the suicide of the West, it was clear they had no chance," Houellebecq declares. Annabelle dies of cancer, but not before being "guttled," as Houellebecq puts it, of her uterus and Fallopian tubes-society's final vengeance, as it were, on a woman who has used her organs as something other than a weapon in the arena of struggle.

Bruno, too, cleaves for a moment to a true love, Christiane, who dutifully indulges his sexual obsessions and comforts him as the mother he never had. Yet after suffering a debilitating injury that destroys her capacity for lovemaking, she kills herself. What else, Houellebecq seems to ask, is possible in a society where sexual expertise is the denominator of one's worthiness to exist?

In the end, with his brother in a mental institution and himself sequestered on the west coast of Ireland, Michel takes his revenge on humanity. It is here, in the final pages of *The Elementary Particles*, that the book reaches its pinnacle. In near-Lovecraftian fashion, it is revealed to us that the pages we have been reading are not the work of an omniscient, amorphous narrator, but rather the testimony of another species, a race of cloned beings made possible by Michel's research into human genetics. What we have been reading is, in fact, an epitaph for the entire

human race, ending with these tremor-inducing words:

The ultimate ambition of this book is to salute the brave and unfortunate species which created us. This vile, unhappy race, barely different from the apes, which nevertheless carried within it such noble aspirations. Tortured, contradictory, individualistic, quarrelsome, and infinitely selfish, it was sometimes capable of extraordinary explosions of violence, but never quite abandoned a belief in love.... As the last members of this race are extinguished, we think it just to render this last tribute to humanity, an homage which itself will one day disappear, buried beneath the sands of time. It is necessary that this tribute be made, if only once. This book is dedicated to mankind.

Lost in the cacophony that followed the publication of *The Elementary Particles*-as with all of Houellebecq's subsequent books-was Houellebecq the writer. This is a great tragedy, since *The Elementary Particles* is, above all, beautiful: At turns angry, erotic, detached, sentimental, and satirical, the book's overriding emotion is an almost unbearable sadness, and the writing is immensely delicate. To be sure, the concentration on the scandalous rather than the literary-on Houellebecq the celebrity rather than Houellebecq the writer-is, to some degree, Houellebecq's own fault. Deliberately provocative, gleefully contemptuous of his own country, and given to Serge Gainsbourg-style antics (such as sexually propositioning a *New York Times* reporter and falling asleep during a live television interview), Houellebecq may be the closest thing the literary world has to a rock star: The level of his fame seems to be commensurate with the degree to which he acts like an unconscionable bastard. People love to hate him, and yet love him because he is hated.

Houellebecq's notoriety no doubt contributed to the outrage surrounding the publication of his next work, *Platform*. Like *Whatever*, *Platform* is the first-person account of a despairing white-collar civil servant, and, like *The Elementary Particles*, it tackles the world and portends its destruction. The protagonist, another perpetually depressed Michel, uses the small legacy he received from his murdered father to go on a tour of Thailand and have sex with the local prostitutes. Eventually he falls in love with Valérie, a fellow traveler specializing in package tourism. This meeting of the minds results in a synthesis of globalization and Houellebecq's own rebellion against sexuality as social hierarchy: A series of package tours dedicated to the sexual gratification of wealthy Westerners by poor Eastern prostitutes. As Michel explains to Valérie:

"Something is definitely happening that's making Westerners stop sleeping with each other. Maybe it's something to do with narcissism, or individualism, the cult of success, it doesn't matter. The fact is that from about the age of twenty-five or thirty, people find it very difficult to meet new sexual partners.... So they end up spending the next thirty years, almost the entirety of their adult lives, suffering permanent withdrawal....

"Therefore," I went on, "you have several hundred million Westerners who have everything they could want but no longer manage to obtain sexual satisfaction. They spend their lives looking without finding it, and they are completely miserable. On the other hand, you have several billion people who have nothing, who are starving, who die young, who live in conditions unfit for human habitation, and who have nothing left to sell except their bodies and their unspoiled sexuality.... It's an ideal trading opportunity."

At first glance, this may seem like mere provocation on Houellebecq's part. Yet while it is most

certainly that, it is also an attempt, in Houellebecq's own words, to arrest "the extension of the domain of the struggle." Through the medium of global capitalism, Michel and Valérie seek to create an oasis from the cruelty of Darwinian sex; for Houellebecq, a sexual marketplace, however debased, is still superior to the brutality of a system which relegates the majority of its participants to a pleasureless, solitary, inhuman existence. The sexual marketplace is in fact the ultimate revenge upon the sexual revolutionaries of the 1960s: The creation of a sexual utopia based not on the negation of social norms, but on the embrace of them. After all, nothing is more normative in a globalized world than the free exchange of capital.

This being Houellebecq, however, the rebellion against the domain of the struggle is doomed to failure. The struggle reasserts itself through the current age's symbol of reactionary force: Islamic terrorism. Bullets and bombs soon annihilate Michel and Valérie's sexual oasis, leaving Valérie dead and Michel a walking corpse. His plans for vengeance destroyed, and the love of his life killed in the process, Michel has only his hatred left to sustain him:

It is certainly possible to stay alive animated simply by a desire for vengeance.... Islam had wrecked my life, and Islam was certainly something I could hate. In the days that followed, I devoted myself to trying to feel hatred for Muslims. I became quite good at it, and I began to follow the international news again. Every time I heard that a Palestinian terrorist, or a Palestinian child or a pregnant Palestinian woman, had been gunned down in the Gaza Strip, I felt a quiver of enthusiasm at the thought of one less Muslim in the world. Yes, it was possible to live like this.

Eventually, however, even hatred dissipates, and Michel dies a desolate expatriate in a Bangkok slum. Houellebecq, however, was left to face the maelstrom of contemporary politics. With tensions in France between the restive Muslim community and the non-Muslim majority already seething, Houellebecq was charged with racist defamation for stating in an interview that Islam is "the most stupid religion." The trial (and the oft-mentioned threat of a fatwa as a result) became a cause célèbre, one that Houellebecq eventually won by asserting that he in fact despises all religions, and not Islam specifically. While the trial made him a hero in some quarters, he understandably became persona non grata in others: France's national Arabic-language newspaper printed Houellebecq's picture over the caption "This man hates you." Houellebecq was even induced to appear in public with a cordon of bodyguards. The entire affair could have been lifted straight from one of Houellebecq's novels, an irony likely not lost on the writer.

As before, the shrieking of the gatekeepers of probity on the issues of Third World prostitution and Islamophobia obscured completely the book's primary theme and its place in Houellebecq's developing universe: The redemptive power of love, and modern society's unrelenting desire to destroy it. Indeed, it is unfortunate that while Houellebecq has been called many things, a romantic is not one of them. For underneath the bile and porn that have made him famous, there is a childlike longing for, and a desperate belief in, love. We can only hope that once the controversies of the moment have faded away, it is for this strange and strangely moving paradox that Houellebecq will be remembered.

H.P. Lovecraft once described the horror story as "any mysterious and irresistible march towards a doom." If this is so, then we may view the entirety of Houellebecq's oeuvre as an unfolding tale of horror, one which achieves its totality in Houellebecq's new novel, *The*

Possibility of an Island. Told in two separate millennia, the book relates the story of Daniel, an aging comedian, and his cloned descendant. Named for the prophet of apocalypse, Daniel is a celebrity provocateur not unlike Houellebecq's post-fame persona. As he reaches middle age, he witnesses the steady collapse of his career, his marriage, his relationship with a young lover, and ultimately himself at the hands of the universal, unforgiving struggle with modern life. Along the way, he encounters a new-age cult called the Elohimites, convinced that aliens called the Elohim created humanity and will someday return. Under the rule of a charismatic guru, they are obsessed by the possibilities of human cloning, willing even to stoop to murder and fraud in order to continue their quest for genetic immortality. The aging Daniel, forsaken by his young mistress (who has, in classic Darwinian fashion, chosen a younger lover to replace him), gives the Elohimites a sample of his DNA for future cloning and kills himself, choosing, in a classic Houellebecqian paradox, both suicide and eternal life simultaneously.

His descendant, Daniel₂₅, lives an isolated, almost emotionless life in a small, hermetically sealed compound, connected to his fellow "neohumans" by an advanced form of the Internet. The earth has been scarred by natural and man-made catastrophes, and the few surviving humans have reverted completely to a state of savagery, serenely observed by the solitary clones. The only disturbance to this post-apocalyptic existence is the persistent rumor of a group of neohumans who have left their compounds to form an independent community on an island. Daniel₂₅'s listless semi-existence is suddenly disrupted by a communication from Esther₃₁, the cloned descendant of the young mistress who prompted Daniel₁'s suicide. It contains a brief poem written by Daniel₁ to Esther₁ before his suicide. It constitutes, for Daniel₂₅, his ancestor's final testimony:

And love, where all is easy,

Where all is given in an instant;

There exists in the midst of time

The possibility of an island.

Driven by these enigmatic words that point, perhaps, to the redemptive power of love, Daniel₂₅ sets off in search of the neohuman community. All he finds, however, is the end of his perpetual existence in the wasteland that is the earth. "I would never reach the goal I had been set," he says. "The future was empty; it was the mountain.... I was, I was no longer. Life was real."

Thus does Houellebecq bring down the curtain on his blasted, wasted world. His tragedy is complete: Even immortality cannot redeem mankind. In *The Possibility of an Island*, Houellebecq, like his hero Lovecraft, has succeeded at last in annihilating the real. He has drawn himself into Lovecraft, deconstructing the world he hates until it is no longer. But Houellebecq has gone further than Lovecraft ever did, for even the fantastic is impossible in this final annihilation. In the end, nothing remains.

This separate but equal annihilation of literature and its subject has not met with much approval. In John Updike's review in the *New Yorker* of *The Possibility of an Island*, for example, he describes what has become the central critique of Houellebecq's work:

It is to Houellebecq's discredit, or at least to his novel's disadvantage, that his thoroughgoing contempt for, and strident impatience with, humanity in its traditional occupations and sentiments prevents him from creating characters whose conflicts and aspirations the reader can care about. The usual Houellebecq hero, whose monopoly on self-expression sucks up most of the narrative's oxygen, presents himself in one of two guises: A desolate loner consumed by boredom and apathy, or a galvanized male porn star. In neither role does he ask for, nor does he receive, much sympathy.

Avoiding the unfashionably puritanistic or unduly PC position, Houellebecq's critics have turned to simple rejection. Houellebecq is, for Updike, simply uninteresting. His vision of life is shallow, apathetic, and fundamentally boring. He lacks the energy or sophistication to deal with those aspects of the world that threaten his convenient (and profitable) despair. Pessimism has made Houellebecq famous, but it has not made him a great writer; he is, quite simply, a fashion.

Similar criticisms were raised regarding *Platform*. Writing in the *Guardian*, Michael Worton proclaimed that the novel was "weakly conceived, badly structured and in narrative terms simply not convincing." Charles Taylor at Salon.com dealt with *The Elementary Particles* in near-Houellebecqian terms:

I stopped reading Michel Houellebecq's last novel, *The Elementary Particles*, right around the scene where the narrator bashes in the head of a cat after the animal has watched him masturbating. By then, I felt I'd been watching Houellebecq masturbate for pages, and I escaped while my own noggin was still intact.

These are not shallow critiques. (Or most of them, anyway: Oddly enough, Taylor goes on to say that he enjoyed *Platform*, a novel which is, if anything, even more onanistic than its predecessor.) They question the foundation of Houellebecq's reputation, the assertion that, however much one may despise him and his books, he cannot be ignored. Like the parent who ignores the petulant child because indulgence will only invite further disobedience, Houellebecq's strongest critics are those who simply dismiss him.

One cannot dismiss this dismissal. Much of what Houellebecq relates is not new; existential despair and the ubiquity of crisis have been staples of European literature since Nietzsche, and the author to whom Houellebecq is most often compared, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, was at the height of his powers in the 1930s. Houellebecq is, perhaps, simply another installment in the long tradition of European transgressive fiction, which becomes more transgressive and thus more banal with each new incarnation. It is not, after all, such a difficult thing to shock people.

Nor is Houellebecq's rebellious persona entirely sustainable. For him to be the most widely discussed author in France, *someone* in the literary establishment must embrace him. Perhaps the author's public antics and the deliberately provocative nature of his work are simply a vicarious amusement for the chattering classes he despises. Or perhaps Houellebecq is an establishment jester, a court clown whose excesses are indulged because they disturb the boredom of everyday privilege. And as for his critique of the 1960s generation, it has been the staple of conservative thought since the 1960s themselves. Bashing the *soixante-huitards* may be frowned upon in some circles, but it is undoubtedly fashionable. Ultimately, it is hard to claim that an author who is so widely popular and influential is, in fact, genuinely

transgressive.

These critiques are substantial, but they cannot be accepted. Houellebecq is more than the sum of his transgressions. He is the author of a coherent universe, one that crosses the line of literature and engages that phenomenon which has lamentably been termed “the human condition.” This is not a shallow accomplishment, nor is the substance of this engagement redundant. Houellebecq may be part of a trend in European literature, but he is not of it. One sees little of Nietzsche or Céline in his books. The more recent works of Bret Easton Ellis, Chuck Palahniuk, and Emmanuel Carrère are, on the other hand, instantly recognizable influences. Moreover, Houellebecq’s work is journalistic in a way that the work of Céline, Camus, or Sartre is not. And despite the accusations of masturbatory writing, Houellebecq is undoubtedly curious about the world outside his own head. His books contain as much material gleaned from his own observations as from his narcissistic perversions; many of his most controversial scenarios are based, in some measure, on basic reportage.

Nor can Houellebecq’s critique of the 1960s be easily dismissed. As opposed to the puritan conservatives bemoaning the collapse of Western civilization, he writes as a participant, indeed as a factor in the collapse itself. Houellebecq is, after all, a sexual libertine. He rejects the facile moralism of the puritan, the hypocrisy inherent in condemning pleasure. He writes about sex as a painfully self-aware Marquis de Sade. If one must speak of sex, he says, speak also of the damage done. Sex in Houellebecq is an inscrutable complexity, simultaneously beautiful and disgusting; it is spoken of in terms of its messianic power and its proximity to destruction. The 1960s are condemned not for liberating sex, but for turning sex into idolatry.

Ultimately, Houellebecq is controversial not because of his transgressions, but because of the impossibility of his vision. One who senses an undeniable truth in Houellebecq’s work must face the question of whether one can accept such a vision and still continue to live. Houellebecq’s answer is a despairing one, but it nonetheless contains some hope: Despite their constant humiliations, frustrations, and inevitable destructions, Houellebecq’s characters are unmistakably possessed of an always unspoken but nonetheless palpable will to live. So palpable, in fact, that it ultimately takes form in the dream of immortality itself.

Houellebecq’s heroes are creatures desperate for life in a world rent by the will toward death. Houellebecq’s humanity is doomed not only to annihilation, but to a desire to continue to live, and thus be trapped in an eternal struggle between modernity’s urge toward its own annihilation and our will to resist death—even to the point of abandoning our genetic code to the science of immortality. *The Possibility of an Island* is thus a consummation, the *cri de coeur* of a man who cannot live and yet cannot bring himself to die. This is the hope that springs from enlightened despair; it is, perhaps, the only true hope in a world in which we all live under an absurd sentence of death. It is the belief that, like Camus’ Sisyphus, we may yet find worlds in the crags of that eternal rock.

There have always been those who cannot live. But it is the rarest among us who cannot live and cannot cease to live, for whom neither life nor death is capable of salving their inscrutable wounds. Their self-penned epitaphs remain among the monuments of the human race, testimonies to our capacity to continue. Michel Houellebecq, whatever else he may be, is one of them. As such, he points, perhaps, to a way up from the discontents of our age: The embrace

of life with eyes wide open to its undeniable ugliness.

Having destroyed the human race and declared the desolation of its successors, it is difficult to imagine where Houellebecq can go next. Perhaps he will join Lovecraft and repair to the world of the purely fantastic. He may, as he has sometimes threatened, simply stop writing. We should pray that he does not, for if so, we and our despairingly fragmented, technologically tyrannized age will have lost something altogether more fragile and precious than a literary legacy: the voice of a human being.

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