

Houellebecq's Omelette



by Theodore Dalrymple

As Chekhov conveyed boredom without being boring, so Michel Houellebecq conveys meaninglessness without being meaningless. Indeed, his particular subject is the spiritual, intellectual, and political vacuity of life in a modern consumer - society—France in this case, but it could be any Western country. One gets the point early on in his *oeuvre*, but his observations are so acute and pointed that his variations on the theme are always worth reading. Houellebecq reveals the absurdity that often lurks behind the commonplace.

He is so acute an observer of social trends that he sometimes appears almost prophetic: He foresaw the terrorist attack in Bali and the advent of the *gilets jaunes* in France. He has long held that the threat of Islamism to the West comes not so much from Islamism itself, with its nugatory intellectual resources, but from the weakness, the doubts, the cowardice, and the venality of Western society's response, itself the result of the spiritual vacuity from which the West suffers and which he describes so well, without—of course—offering a

solution (it is not the place of novelists to be constructive, except in the sense that criticism is the first stage of taking thought for the morrow).

His latest book, *Anéantir*—not published in English until the second half of 2022—is by far his longest: too long, in fact, its 734 pages more than the content justifies. The first print run was of 300,000 copies, which is remarkable for a serious work of fiction and suggests that the author is now so great a literary phenomenon that he is quite beyond editing. All the same, he is never less than readable, and in this book he has somewhat controlled, though not altogether, his tendency to pornographic descriptions of what are clearly his own sexual fantasies. Perhaps his levels of testosterone are declining.

It is not for his plots that one reads Houellebecq, nor for his characterizations. His protagonists are always the same or similar: men approaching or in middle age who are intelligent and well educated and who, from a materialistic point of view, have no problems; they do not suffer the sordid anxiety that arises from having to make ends meet. Their only problem is that they don't know how to live or what to live for. They are not disillusioned, because they have never had any illusions. They are without religion, without political belief, even without culture, at least in the sense of its being a vital force of their lives rather than an ornament or a pastime. Their human, familial, and sexual relations are shallow, based on the feelings of the moment, without any adherence to or control by traditional values. In a sense they are free, but only in the way that a particle in Brownian motion is free. Loneliness is their fate, and it is, one may infer, the natural consequence of the kind of freedom promoted by the revolutionaries of May 1968. The revolutionaries sowed the wind and reaped nihilism; and so there is a strong element of -nostalgia running through Houellebecq's work, without any consolatory suggestion that the omelette could be returned to its eggs. Never before in history, suggests Houellebecq, have

we been so prosperous, and never before so incompetent in the matter of knowing how to live.

Anéantir (Annihilation) is a polyphonic work, with several themes interwoven. It is set five years after its publication date, in the election year 2027. The protagonist, Paul, is a civil servant and the confidant of a successful technocratic Minister of the Economy, Bruno, who re-establishes the French economy on the path of growth. Bruno, a highly capable man, is a possible candidate for the presidency, which gives Houellebecq the opportunity to describe the auto-satirizing nature of modern politics, in which communication is all and substance practically nothing. Those who coach the candidates in the arts of communication are all young women, the world having become both feminized and masculinized: feminized in the sense that more leading roles are taken by women, masculinized in the sense that those women have taken on a typically male set of ambitions and attitudes toward work.

Interwoven with this political theme is a mystery story. A rash of strange messages, including digitized film of Bruno being executed by guillotine, appears on the internet worldwide; container ships are blown up; the world's largest sperm bank, in Denmark, is burnt down. The secret services try but fail to discover who is behind this activity, and by the end of the book we still don't know. This is unsatisfactory: it is like reading a whodunit without ever discovering whodunit. It gives the author license to roam freely in his imagination without the disciplining need for plausibility.

The personal lives of the characters occupy most of the book. They are, as is to be expected in Houellebecq, unsatisfactory, to say the least. For example, Paul's weak and ineffectual younger brother, Aurélien, whose only interest in life is the restoration of medieval tapestries, is married to a minor journalist of vicious character who has a child by artificial insemination, though Aurélien is not himself sterile. She chooses a black sperm donor to maximize her husband's

humiliation, publicly demonstrating that the son is not his, and at the same time claiming liberal virtue for herself, her son being living proof that she is not racially prejudiced. - Houellebecq is here suggesting that what in the modern world counts as political virtue is often compatible with, or even the product of, extremely unpleasant personal character.

Another theme of the book is our society's treatment of the old. Paul's father, who was a senior officer in the French secret service, has a devastating stroke and is admitted to a special unit for people in the vegetative state, but for vindictive administrative reasons this humanely run unit is closed down soon thereafter and Paul's father is transferred to a home that is, in effect, an institution for euthanasia by neglect.

Under French law, in the case of a patient who cannot communicate, the treating doctor has the right and duty to determine what is in the patient's best interest. So Paul and the rest of his family contact a group, supposedly linked to the far right, that rescues old people from the clutches of the institutions that will, *de facto*, kill them. Is this the next social movement to arise? The intrigue and its consequences, the bureaucratic indifference, cruelty, and incompetence of the modern state, are very plausibly depicted. Houellebecq, incidentally, has been a consistent and ferocious opponent of the drive to legalize euthanasia in France, which once again sets him at odds with the *bien pensant* intelligentsia of his country. "When a country—a society, a civilization—gets to the point of legalising euthanasia," he wrote last year in *Le Figaro*, "it loses in my eyes all right to respect. It becomes henceforth not only legitimate, but desirable, to destroy it; so that something else—another country, another society, another civilization—might have a chance to arise."

Anéantir implies that individuals, no less than civilizations, destroy themselves. Modern people, in Houellebecq's stories,

have a will to self-destruction: They seek out misery when there is no external, or "objective," cause for it. Toward the end of the book, Paul, aged fifty, suffers from a cancer of the mouth that will soon kill him—hence the title of the book. In the meantime, he and his wife have rekindled their love after years of estrangement. They have continued to live together, though without any real contact between them. Their estrangement seems to have been the result of self-destruction, since neither of them changes essentially when they rediscover their love for each other.

Love redeems life and gives it a meaning, we may infer from this book. But unfortunately, love is especially difficult to find in the contemporary world, where money, power, success, and Brownian-motion-type freedom are valued much more. We value limitless possibilities, whereas love necessitates commitment and self-limitation.

For me, however, the pleasure of reading Houellebecq is in his laser-like observations. Here, for example, is his description of a huge modern office complex for the secret service, through the eyes of one of the characters:

He had never found any particular aesthetic merit in this unstructured juxtaposition of gigantesque parallelepipeds of glass and steel. . . . In any case, the aim pursued by the designers was not beauty, not even approval, but rather the showcasing of a certain technical competence—as if it were a matter above all of demonstrating it to future extra-terrestrials.

Has there ever been a better summary of the efforts of such architects as Frank Gehry, Renzo Piano, Jean Nouvel or Zaha Hadid? They build in genuflection to Martians.

Over and over again, Houellebecq makes observations that are as sharp as the maxims of La Rochefoucauld. Here, again, he describes how any conversation in France may either be

restarted if it stalls, or diverted from its previous course:

. . . It is true that Zemmour always works, it is enough to mention his name and the conversation begins to purr along labeled and nicely predictable paths, a bit like that of Georges Marchais [the former leader of the Communist Party] in his time, everyone finds his social markers, his natural position, from which he derives quiet satisfaction.

Such brilliant passages are to be found throughout the book.

Notwithstanding literary faults (from which, after all, no author is entirely free), there is no contemporary writer known to me who is a finer dissector than Houellebecq of the cultural, psychological, and spiritual predicament of the West in the present day. His palette is restricted, perhaps, but his canvas is large.

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