

A mongrel in the path : prose & poetry by Michel Houellebecq

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Plato defines two types of speech: diegesis is an author's own voice; mimesis is the imitated voice of a character. In texts by Michel Houellebecq, the distinction between these voices is often equivocal. This makes for ambiguity in his art and for uneasy responses to his apparently authentic cynicism. He has published criticism, poetry, novels and miscellaneous pieces, some of them semi-fictional, or even pseudo-fictional. Indeed, "pseudo-fictions" might be applicable also to the novels, for they all pose in some degree the question of what in them is mimesis and what diegesis.

To speak of "cynicism" makes one sound like Henry James complaining of Maupassant, whom he called "a lion in the path".ⁱ Used with fidelity to its derivation from the Greek for "dog", "cynicism" is an underogatory term. The term "mongrel" I use too as a statement of fact. Mongrels are miscegenated if not misbegotten byblows of forebears of better breeding. And Houellebecq shows many promiscuous affinities with diverse predecessors who all seem to have had a hand in engendering him. The narrator of *La possibilité d'une île* finds his greatest fulfilment with a mongrel (later revealed to be a corgi). Words containing "dog", such as "dogmatism", "dogged" and "doggerel", also have relevance to Houellebecq's work.

He shows, for instance, indifference towards the abjection of his characters. A legacy from the French pessimistic Realists, this is also something that Houellebecq admires in one of his avowed mentors, the American supernaturalist, Howard Phillips Lovecraft, who "destroys his characters as though merely dismembering a puppet".ⁱⁱ Houellebecq does this when killing off characters. Other features of his writing which may derive from his adolescent admiration of Lovecraft include a propensity to essentialist if not racist thinking; the first mention of *particules élémentaires*, a vocable that became the title of his first best-seller (Englished as *Atomised*):ⁱⁱⁱ "The universe is merely a furtive arrangement of elementary particles"; and his interest in quantum mechanics and Hilbertian spaces.^{iv} Four other predecessors with whom Houellebecq shows affinities are Schopenhauer, Maupassant and the Marquis de Sade, all steeped in pessimism and misogyny, and Auguste Comte, the founder of positivism and

sociology. One mystery here is that Houellebecq's second-hand ideas are acclaimed as pregnant with punctual originality.

Amid much borrowed and constipated ideology, there is also a dose of drollery, deadpan ironic deflations reminiscent of the Céline of *Voyage au bout de la nuit*: "As a teenager Michel believed that suffering gave extra dignity to man. But now he had to admit he was wrong. What gave extra dignity to man was television".^v In their moral dimension, his characters are not only alienated, cynical, solitary, feckless and superfluous, but also impostors aware of their own fraudulence. They are reminiscent of Sartre in their crisis of will and meaning-to-life, of Céline in their subjection by the dehumanizing, atomizing system of the world, the Camus of *L'Étranger* in their passive acceptance of it, their mitigated capacity for human contact.

In Houellebecq's poetry, two words often rhyme: *vide* ("empty" or "emptiness") and *insipide*. They express a recurring preoccupation: the emotional poverty of contemporary man, his ontological and sexual misery. I use the word "man" not to imply any priority of one sex over the other, but because Houellebecq writes mainly about men and uses female characters, or rather parts of female bodies, as little more than boys' toys. Such men are orphans of God; and sex is all they have to give a meaning to existence. This ontology underlies Houellebecq's admiration of Lovecraft's "unmitigated hatred for the world in general, exacerbated by a particular disgust for the modern world".^{vi} Other *idées fixes* are time as ordeal; human determinism seen as inevitable; the futility of life and love; a generalized disaffection between his characters and their fellow men; the idea that economic liberalism has turned relations between men and women into a system of sexual liberalism; modern humanity's lack of belief.

That Houellebecq is a source of scandal is flagrant; that his work is new, rather than just recent, may be less apparent; that it amounts to art, and what is authentic about it, may be problematical. He has been called "the Baudelaire of the supermarket".^{vii} Both Baudelaire and Houellebecq have been seen as exemplars of the power of art to express things so new as to shock. A commonplace of modern aesthetics is that art should be capable of scandalizing us into seeing what we are reluctant to see, making us feel what cannot be felt in any other way.^{viii} To scandalize, however, though it may be a necessary

condition of art, is not a sufficient one. There is nothing scandalously new in rabid misogyny, whether Baudelaire's or Houellebecq's, though Baudelaire did stress an abject physiology of women in ways that struck his Romantic generation as unseemly. There is nothing new in world weariness, disgust at life or subjectivity seen as suffering, whether it is Baudelaire's wish to escape "anywhere out of this world"^{ix} or Houellebecq's "souls weary of life".^x All this has been with us for two centuries and more, since young Werther's sorrows and the *mal du siècle*. Nor is there anything new in a preoccupation with the bodily secretions of sexuality. Houellebecq naively (or disingenuously?) asks: "Is it really certain that erotic or pornographic descriptions are devoid of literary interest?"^{xi}

Other questions arise. Can a heartfelt diatribe be art? Can the haverings of a monomaniac be art? Or does an excess of such seeming authenticity compromise the viability of art? These are, of course, questions which were posed long since by the work of Sade. Nowadays, theorists' interest in Sade tends not to be aesthetic or literary—they are mostly psychoanalysts and a particular strain of feminists. Will feminists come to see Houellebecq, the writer of misogynistic potboilers, as a liberator of their sisters? Houellebecq's narrators speak of women almost solely in sexual terms, usually derogatory (*connasse, boudin, filles, pétasses, radasses, minettes, bimbos, l'ignoble garce, la salope, de la chair fraîche, la jeune pouliche, les femmes qui m'ouvraient leurs organes*), for which anyone can supply pejorative English equivalents reducing women to tits and bums, "bitches", "fillies", "bints", "cunts", "chicks", "wenches", "slobs", "toms", "fresh flesh", "women who opened their organs to me", etc. Two sentences, one from a prose poem, link women and alienation and show Houellebecq's prevailing attitude to them: "However much one may imagine speech is impossible between oneself and the rest of humanity, a vagina is still an opening".^{xii} The other is a reflexion by the narrator of *Plateforme*: "Intellectually, I managed to feel a certain attraction for Moslem women's vaginas" (p. 27). Usually, though, the word that Houellebecq and his characters use to speak of vaginas is *chatte*, which his translator, Frank Wynne, renders as "pussy".

Intellectual and moral penury often seems to accompany excessive formalism. Houellebecq shows it can consist with sloppy formalism. His advice

to apprentice writers is: “Do not feel obliged to invent a new form. New forms are rare. One per century is pretty good going.”^{xiii} This is in part self-defence, for he frequently composes poetry in classical French meter, the twelve-syllabled alexandrine. This poetry has been dismissed as “doggerel”.^{xiv} Much of it is literally prose; and most of what is in ostensible verse form reads like journalistic sentences divided into lines with capital letters at the beginning, their banality reinforced by the author’s appearing to believe, as he vouchsafes truisms about the futility of life, the inevitability of death, etc, that he is revealing undiscovered truths. He adds superfluous syllables, apparently to make up the required meter of an alexandrine. Either he does not notice that some verses contain not twelve syllables but thirteen or even fourteen or he does it by design. This inattention to form is at times matched, in the novels, by a similar sloppiness with grammar and usage, inelegances of style and careless writing. Houellebecq’s novels show the features that he (or his character Bruno) criticizes in Huxley’s: “Huxley is no doubt a very bad writer; his sentences are clumsy and graceless, his characters insipid and mechanical”.^{xv} This judgment should be moderated a little, since the sentences in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* tend to be shorter, more compact, more shaped than in the three later novels.

Is it sloppy formalism that justifies this author’s reputation in some literary circles? He writes a longish novel *Plateforme*, his third, almost without plot, almost without characters, style or design; and to fill 350 pages, having a total of four things to say, he must say them several times: humans, by and large, are unlovable; love consists of mouthfuls of semen; Islam is the stupidest religion ever invented (a view already voiced in *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 271); and having virtuosic sex, preferably with Asian or African prostitutes, as long as they are poor, cheap, grateful and very young, is the best that self-despising Western men can aspire to nowadays. *Plateforme*, reminiscent of Huxley’s *Brave New World*, belongs in that most ill-begotten of mongrel sub-genres, the Utopian *roman à thèse*. It is reminiscent too of Sade at his most tedious: a sequence of sex scenes demonstrates what we already know, that the more anatomically detailed a description of coition is, the less erotically arousing it becomes; the participants’ boredom can only be alleviated, as Nabokov said, by bringing in the gardener,^{xvi} or in this case a passing cleaner; and the multiple couplings

must be manically and misanthropically ideologized. There are long tracts of pseudo-dialogue, without human interest, and many disquisitions, doggedly, stultifyingly, Balzacianly comprehensive, delivered by quasi-characters who are mere mouthpieces uttering slabs of information on the multi-national tourism industry.

Some works also offer a view on fiction. The narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* reflects on the unsuitedness of the novel to convey the mode of life he is describing: “[It] is not designed to describe indifference or nothingness. For that, we would need to invent a procedure that was flatter, duller and more concise” (p. 42). He professes a lack of novelistic intentions: “The whole accumulation of realistic details, supposedly portraying characters, setting them off against one another, has always seemed to me, if I may say so, just plain bloody stupid” (p. 16). The dearth of fulfilments to be found in human contacts, including love, makes for the futility of writing: “Human relations are becoming increasingly impossible, which makes for a proportionate reduction in the number of anecdotes making up a life” (p. 16). A prose poem, « Les anecdotes », puts a blunter point upon this: “All human beings are alike. What would be the point in putting together a whole new string of anecdotes? The pointlessness of the novel”.^{xvii} This poet’s view is that the human individual is “pretty generally a cruel and miserable little animal”.^{xviii} Houellebecq has stressed his hostility to character-based fiction since the opening words of his first prose work:

Life is pain and disappointment. So it is futile to go on writing realist novels . . . Humanity as it stands inspires no more than mild curiosity. All those clever, perceptive observations, those dramatic situations, all those anecdotes . . . We need a sovereign antidote against realism in all its forms.^{xix}

One is reminded of his admiration of Lovecraft’s modes of characterization: “characters who are interchangeable and flat . . . the pointlessness of any differentiated psychology . . . the designed flatness of Lovecraft’s characters”.^{xx} However, Houellebecq also ambiguates his narratorial persona, for instance in a piece published with the “intermediary” pseudo-fiction *Lanzarote*: “The thought

of having to tell a personal anecdote is enough to bore me witless. If I'm absolutely obliged to do so, I lie".^{xxi} The voice appears to be the author's; and it is largely this Cretan-liar type of pseudo-authenticity that makes it difficult to have an unambiguous response to much of what he writes.

The narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* has a literary hobby: he writes "animal stories", pessimistic parables, with lessons on life, sexuality and death, on relations personal and socio-political. In *La possibilité d'une île*, the narrator writes sketches for television and film. In *Les Particules élémentaires*, one of the brothers writes poems, essays and even a utopic fiction set on an island, like Huxley; another character, Desplechin, toys with writing a utopic fable. The other brother, Michel, writes poetry. The slabs of text that these activities engender are essays, not characters. One ploughs through them, forgetting who is declaiming, suspecting it's the author.

So, what differentiates *Extension du domaine de la lutte* from a report on a case study of incipient psychosis is a mode of art. Or at least artfulness. There is an albeit minimal self-reflexivity of the work of art, deriving from the notion coined by Gide in 1893 as *mise en abyme*.^{xxii} This increases the ambiguous focus of Houellebecq's art. As do the front covers of his best-selling novels in French paperback: as though to exploit this ambiguity, they consist of large pictures of the author, apparent illustrations of the content. The impression that the narrators might be the author is further reinforced by the fact that many of them speak in the first person (one of them is known as Michel); and another, though speaking in the third person, tells of a different character called Michel. The name "Michel" occurs in poems which read like authorial confessions or memories of Houellebecq's adolescence, as does the name "Annabelle", also used for a character in *Les Particules élémentaires*. The name "Véronique", to whom confessional poems are addressed, is used for a character in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. Place names, Clifden, Crécy-la-Chapelle, Saorge, used in *Les Particules élémentaires*, appear in poems of apparently personal reminiscence. Like some of the characters in the novels, the *je*-persona of the poetry and of *Rester vivant* (who appears to be the author) works amid the tower complex of La Défense. Lovecraft's lack of "differentiated psychology" can be seen in the fact that Houellebecq's narrators and characters share some characteristics (as they resemble their author in some ways): alienated,

self-hating, chain-smoking, bourbon-drinking, masturbating, generalizing racists whose sole social pleasure is sexual activity with many female bodies. They figure in different works, but can appear to be the same character; and a reader may well wonder whether this is not the author, who has been prosecuted for expressing views as injurious to Islam as those expressed by his characters.

The term “Balzacian” I use not in any derogatory way. In 1997, Houellebecq published a defence of Balzac, criticizing the idea that the adjective *balzacien* is pejorative.^{xxiii} The epigraph to *Plateforme* is from Balzac; the narrator of *La possibilité d'une île* reads Balzac. There is nothing aesthetically deplorable in a novelist who writes omniscient Balzac-like disquisitions nearly 200 years after Balzac. It may say something about the novelist's didacticism and unoriginality in formal, artistic or stylistic things (also seen in his intellectual affinities with ideologues such as Comte, Sade and Huxley). Omniscience certainly consists well with dogmatism and authoritarianism. The same goes for Houellebecq's interest in utopias, dystopias, science fiction and Lovecraft, and his preference for such genre writing over Sartre, Beauvoir and Malraux, and what he calls the “tomfooleries” of Baudrillard and Bourdieu: “It's hardly an exaggeration to say that, in intellectual things, nothing would remain from the second half of the twentieth century if there hadn't been science fiction writing”.^{xxiv}

Novelists who, rather than presenting relationships and individuals, choose to write diagnostic allegories about society as a whole are constantly tempted to replace dialogue by explicatory monologues, in which one character spouts forth lengthy truths which do not lend themselves to characterization and interaction. The novel degenerates into a feeble fable. In *Les Particules élémentaires*, a character spruiks much of his life story to his brother then spruiks the rest to his mistress, in thirty-odd pages of monologue. For the fancier of fiction, this is the great weakness of ideological utopias: the fiction is soon lost among the ideology. Structure, plot and characterization become more and more irrelevant to the purpose of the discourse. Dialogue becomes catechism, maundering into the undramatic soliloquy in which the author, as dogged polemicist, is much more at home. This is the case with, say, Anthony Burgess's abject piece *1985*, with Houellebecq's most evident precursors, Huxley's *Brave New World* and *Island*, with Sade. In the pseudo-fiction *Lanzarote*, we have the long letter from

Rudi the Belgian policeman. In *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, it is both part and parcel of the narrating voice and also the pretext for the lengthy extracts from the narrator's *fictions animalières*, affording a similar venting of ideology. In *La possibilité d'une île* it takes over the whole narration. Yevgeny Zamyatin, the author of *We*, the most influential dystopia of the twentieth century, says this of the genre (in an essay on H. G. Wells published in the early 1920s):

[one of its characteristics] which proceeds organically from its subject matter, is that in form the Utopia is invariably static: the Utopia is always a description and always lacks any dynamic of plot. These books . . . are, in fact, social pamphlets disguised as science-fiction novels.^{xxv}

That could have been written about Houellebecq's fictions. It is often said that the best novelists show rather than tell; Houellebecq is the extreme of the type who tells rather than shows.

His omniscient stance is evident in other ways, for example, in a narrator's generalizations: "human beings are apt to establish hierarchies"; in gnomic verities unasccribed to any character's point of view: "a life focussed on an objective leaves little room for memory".^{xxvi} These generalizations are usually clichés, truisms of such bathetic banality that one wonders, given the author's unoriginality in other things, whether he believes he is original and profound or whether they are po-faced parody. Here too there is ambiguity of point of view in the parataxis which is often the author's mode of delivery, merely juxtaposing them to some other statements and not clearly ascribing them to any character: "Death is the great equalizer"; "People must weep, what else can they do?"; "The power of the mind is immense, as long as it stays within its own domain".^{xxvii} Other generalizations, starting as the view of a character, end in narratorial authorization: "He too had been a victim of this unmotherly mother—that was his view of things, a pretty basic view, but actually quite accurate"; "When you consider the past, you always have the impression (probably a false one) of a certain determinism"; "Annabelle died two days later and the family's view was that it was probably for the best. On the death of someone, people always tend to say some bloody stupid thing like that".^{xxviii} One finds them in the padded

alexandrines as well: “Life too often separates those who love each other”; “Time takes no pity on us”; “Ye Gods, how insipid man is!”.^{xxix}

Most of the text of the four novels is narration, even text representing characters’ speech. Ever since Flaubert developed his proficiency with *style indirect libre*, this has an ironic effect, the lack of comment being an implicit comment on what is thus reported. Ambiguity arises when one is unsure whether it is mimetic or diegetic:

Bruno stopped talking to order two coffees before continuing. Over the years he had developed a conception of life that was cynical and violent, typically masculine. The universe was a sealed off place, rampant with animality, everything shut in by a hard impenetrable horizon, quite perceptible but inaccessible, the horizon of the moral law. It is written, however, that love contains the law and makes it real.^{xxx}

This is so ambiguously couched that, read in context, it could actually be not Bruno’s view, or the narrator’s, or even the author’s, but Bruno’s interlocutor’s. Elsewhere, there is even less differentiation between narrator and character (see Bruno’s account of a snuff film, pp. 205-206). Throughout, sentences like “Bruno stopped talking to order two coffees before continuing”, in which characters light a cigarette or look out of the window for a line and a half, separate lengthy tracts of disquisition, as though the author is paying lip service to an expectation of fictional narration (or pretending not to be pulling the wool over his readers’ eyes).

Another feature of the parataxis is the ironic juxtaposition of a character’s thoughts or feelings with something like an extract from an economic history or a government report:

Bruno eventually showed his prick one day to a till girl in a supermarket. Fortunately she just laughed and didn’t report him . . . Most of his memories of adolescence were of this sort.

Later, globalization of the economy gave rise to much fiercer competition, which was to sweep away the dreams of social

integration of the general population throughout a generalized middle class with regularly increasing disposable income; broader and broader social categories suffered more and more from job insecurity and unemployment.^{xxxix}

This is another of Lovecraft's characteristics praised by Houellebecq, the recourse to "a tone like that of a report on a dissection" (*H. P. Lovecraft*, p. 82):

The scientific paper style used by HPL in his last stories derives from the principle that *the more the things described are monstrous and unthinkable, the more the description must be precise and clinical*.^{xxxix}

In *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, the narrator makes a direct parallel between the social system governed by economic liberalism and a sexual system equally governed (another idea that Houellebecq found in Lovecraft).^{xxxix} Houellebecq's recurring view is that we live in a world of "mercantile modernity".^{xxxix} This preoccupation surfaces also in the poetry, as in the prosy « Dernier rempart contre le libéralisme »,^{xxxix} which reads like a manifesto of demonstrators at conferences of the World Trade Organization. A related view, imparted as a generalization which the Michel of *Les Particules élémentaires* supposedly illustrates, is: "often threatened by poverty, the men of his generation also spent their lives in loneliness and bitterness" (p. 7). As comment on the characters, this is a tendentious and fallacious non sequitur, irrelevant to what Houellebecq claims to demonstrate in this fiction, playing no role in the lives of his middle-class, highly educated and affluent characters. This contradiction between the characters' lives and the ideology accompanying them is blatant again in *La possibilité d'une île*. If life is so empty, why would such a character aspire to immortality? If people are mere mechanisms, vacuous, deluded and unrewarding, why would such a character want to frequent them?

In *Les Particules élémentaires*, determinism is a recurring consideration of the "Michel" character, of the narrator too (or the author?), as in the lengthy epigraph from Comte. This belief that molecular determinism shapes human

behaviour explains the intermittent mentions of freedom in the novels and occasional poems: “Freedom seems a myth to me,/Or else it’s a nickname for emptiness;/Freedom frankly bugs me”.^{xxxvi} In *La possibilité d’une île*, too, the death of human relations is seen as deterministic (p. 364). To maintain that molecular determinism abolishes human freedom is of course neither new nor in a sense true. Perhaps Houellebecq means that the brain’s structure makes it impossible to have thoughts that brains cannot have. This appears to be something between a truism and a futile nonsense, unless we are to suppose that a race of human beings might evolve whose physiological existence would not be determined by their molecular nature. *Les Particules élémentaires*, recounting such a evolution, shows this to be the sort of fanciful speculation that Houellebecq enjoys entertaining. It enables him to ignore the world in which real human beings make choices not imposed by the molecular structure of the universe or their brain. A striking couplet of Baudelaire’s, from which much of Houellebecq seems to derive (one of his characters even quotes it^{xxxvii}), presents sexual pleasure and a punishing determinism as the parameters of an irksome ontological equation: “The vile multitude of mortals, under the lash of Pleasure, that merciless torturer, goes seeking remorse in slavish joys”.^{xxxviii} More than anything, Houellebecq and his characters hate freedom. He reserves his strongest virulence for traditional humanism and notions of freedom, human dignity and moral progress. *Les Particules élémentaires* celebrates the abolition of all three. It tells of the development of humans who are both immortal and capable of asexual reproduction. This idea is also the whole point and climax of the fairytale *La possibilité d’une île*. Utopia according to Houellebecq: not just no selfishness, no cruelty and no anger,^{xxxix} but no more death, sexual uncertainties, misfortunes or metaphysical considerations, no interest to be taken in identity or the point of life, no belief in goodness and love, no children, no anxiety over choices and their moral consequences, no sibling rivalry, no religions, in short, no existence, or any thought of it, beyond the body. Houellebecq’s perfect utopia is the extinction of human beings. One is reminded of the sub-title he gave to his study of Lovecraft: *Contre le monde, contre la vie* (“Against the world, against life”) and of its penultimate sentence: “To offer an alternative to life in all its forms, to be in permanent opposition, making constant appeal against life, that is the highest mission of a poet on this earth”.^{xl}

A central theme in Houellebecq is evident from the first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*: “human relations are becoming increasingly impossible” (pp. 16 & 43). A character in *Lanzarote* makes a diagnosis of Belgian society: “In Belgium nowadays we no longer have what is conventionally known as a society; we have nothing in common but humiliation and fear” (p. 49); in *Plateforme*, the narrator seems autistic in his inability to relate to others; in *La possibilité d’une île*, the narrator’s closest relationship is with a mongrel; in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, the narrator’s relationships are sporadic, ephemeral and abortive. What he sees as his “freedom” is an addiction (p. 61). He says: “I really believe that a whole life spent reading would have suited me better. Such a life was not given to me” (p. 15). This reminds us of Sartre’s definition of *mauvaise foi*, a self-deception consisting in denial of one’s freedom. Houellebecq’s narrators see life not as their responsibility, the consequence of their choices. Their ills, not of their own making, are put upon them by molecular determinism or by parents.

It should be noted that when Lovecraft judged a text to be “a noxiously hideous fragment” he meant this “as high praise”.^{xli} In Houellebecq, many fragments might appear “noxiously hideous”. The sort of Baudelairean image he favours is “cigarette butts crushed into the mud” and “On the beach you find condoms”. He writes poems about the disgusting inside of his own mouth or pus and blood coming from his ear.^{xlii} Baudelaire made images of decay and rot, stench and maggots, in the carcass of a dog, as though to disgust the reader. There are also Houellebecq’s casual insults to his father: “my father, a nasty bastard” or the best known of his alexandrines: “My father was a solitary stupid cunt of a barbarian”.^{xliii} There is the statement: “Fortunately, AIDS is in the wings”. Or this autobiographical statement: “Two German women . . . Probably lezzies. But I for one just love seeing two women masturbating each other, licking each other’s cunts. I don’t have any Lesbian friends, so I’m usually deprived of this joy”.^{xliv} These statements appear to be spoken by Houellebecq himself. Not only his literary persona, but his characters, too, have a way of thinking in such terms. As a mother lies dying in *Les Particules élémentaires*, a son tells her she deserves to die like a dog and promises that he will make a point of pissing in her ashes every morning (p. 256). The narrator of *La possibilité d’une île* says: “When I got my wife pregnant, I dumped her pretty

soon” and “The day my son committed suicide, I rustled up a tomato omelette” (p. 29).

Houellebecq gives a doggedly reductive definition of his characters’ lives, projects and fulfilments, all of which fit within a narrow spectrum of sexual aspiration, performance and abjection. In *Les Particules élémentaires*, the two main characters, like illustrations of Larkin’s “This be the verse” (“they fuck you up, your mum and dad”), have grown to adulthood with dysfunctioning sexualities: Michel has no sex life (“his prick was just for pissing with”, p. 21), which is a matter of failure for him; Bruno has little life other than sex life, though he too finds it acutely unsatisfactory and it is, of course, a matter of failure for him. So, in addition to the supermarket Baudelairisms, there are crudely simplistic Freudianisms in the characters. Typical is one who ruminates on his relationship with his teenage son: “They were approaching the state of rivalry, which is natural for men. They were like animals fighting in the same cage, which was time”.^{xliv} Children, in *La possibilité d’une île*, are parents’ “deadly enemies” (p. 393).

At times the author or a character (again, the fact that they all speak alike makes it difficult to tell who is speaking) entertains a doubt about the point of an existence in which orgasm is the only fulfilment and wonders whether such an existence could be tolerable in the long run: “How long could western society continue to exist without some sort of religion?”.^{xlvi} This worthy consideration, when ladled into a novel to hamper the characters, whom it makes into wooden contrivances carrying little conviction, bears some resemblance to claptrap. Given the nineteenth-century nature of much of the author’s worldview, one is reminded that Comte, whom he is fond of quoting, who crops up overtly in the last pages of *Les Particules élémentaires* and in an epigraph of *La possibilité d’une île* (as well as in that text’s recurring lucubrations about the death of religion), was a utopian who saw positivism as a stage on the way to a Religion of Humanity. At their mother’s deathbed, the half-brothers of *Les Particules élémentaires* have a detailed disagreement (pp. 257-258) about religion in Comte’s system, very like their difference over the brothers Huxley a hundred pages earlier.

There is a school of aesthetics which holds that any art must contain a trace element of humanity and that the most human element common to all art is

love: “In fact, art is the mind itself, delighting in what it loves.”^{xlvii} We need artists, the same aesthetics says,

not to make our own lives more beautiful, which would be no more than artifice or ornament, but to make manifest life’s own intrinsic beauty, to teach us how to see it, to take pleasure in it and rejoice in it—to love it. It is not a question of prettifying, nor of creating a likeness. It is love without deceit . . .^{xlviii}

When love itself is treated as it is by Houellebecq, that is, reduced to little more than transient couplings after the manner of Sade, one wonders whether his art is proportional to his disdain for such a notion of love. There are two celebrated French definitions of love, one given by Chamfort in the 1790s, the other by Stendhal in the 1820s: “Love, as it exists in society, is merely the exchange of two fantasies and the touch of two skins”.^{xlix} And: “What I call crystallization is the working of the mind as it turns everything that impinges upon it into the discovery that the loved one has ever more perfections”.¹ Both definitions speak of something which, in Houellebecq, is noticeable largely by its absence: the fact that love is a matter of the mind, the imagination, rather than, or at least as well as, of the flesh, its glands and fluids. One of his poems, called « L’amour, l’amour », ends like this:

I speak to all those who have never been loved
Who have never managed to be liked
I speak to all the absentees from liberated sex
From ordinary orgasm

Fear nothing, friends, your loss is minimal
Nowhere does love exist
It’s just a cruel joke played on you
A game for specialists^{li}

Houellebecq’s authentic aesthetic values inform his hatred of the “mediocre” poetry of Jacques Prévert: that Prévert liked flowers, birds, the old

quarters of Paris, believed in love and liberty, had a view of the world that was “flat, superficial and false” and wrote the script of the film *Les enfants du paradis*.^{lii} A related view is this, from « Nature », a poem in classical meter: “I envy none of these pompous imbeciles / Who go into ecstasies at a rabbit’s burrow / For nature is ugly, boring and hostile; / Nature has no message to give to humans”. Elsewhere he confesses to hating countryside; and “I’ve never been able to bear lengthy moments of communion with nature” and “Vegetable life is depressing, The way it proliferates endlessly, In the fields”.^{liii} In this context, a title like *Rester vivant* (= “Staying Alive”) and the immortality offered by *La possibilité d’une île* resemble a death sentence rather than an ambition or a promise. The narrator of the earliest novel, not wholly alienated from other people or the natural world, is capable of being touched by emotional contacts. He is even affected by natural phenomena, a sunrise, springtime in the forest; and he can admire grandiose architecture. Some such moments, few and far between in Houellebecq, can be found towards the end of his third volume of verse, *Renaissance*. More typical, though, is the ending of *La possibilité d’une île*, where a narrator (or is it his umpteenth reincarnation?) trudges for ever towards sterile fulfilment across a lunar landscape composed of dust, alone at last: “Life was real” (p. 485). Without even a mongrel.

ⁱ Henry James, *The House of Fiction* (London: Hart-Davis, 1957) pp. 146-7

^{liii} M. Houellebecq, *H. P. Lovecraft : Contre le monde, Contre la vie*, (Paris: Éditions J’ai lu, 1991), p. 19. All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated. All references are to current French paperback editions; dates are those of first publication.

^{liii} *Les Particules élémentaires* (Paris: Éditions J’ai lu, 1998)

^{iv} *H. P. Lovecraft*, pp. 17, 87

^v *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 120

^{vi} *H. P. Lovecraft*, p. 54

^{vii} Quoted by Perry Anderson, *London Review of Books*, 2.9.2004, p. 7.

^{viii} Agnès Tricoire, « Hommes et libertés », no. 121, janvier/février/mars 2003, p. 39

^{ix} « Le Spleen de Paris », in *Petits poèmes en prose* (1862)

^x *H. P. Lovecraft*, p. 22

^{xi} *H. P. Lovecraft*, p. 57

^{xii} In *Le sens du combat*, reprinted in *Poésies* (Paris: Éditions J’ai lu, 1996), p. 17

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- xiii *Rester vivant* (Paris: Libro, 1991), p. 15
- xiv Perry Anderson, *London Review of Books*, 2.9.04, p. 7
- xv *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 157
- xvi Vladimir Nabokov, 'On a Book entitled *Lolita*', in *Lolita* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1959), p. 303
- xvii *Le sens du combat*, in *Poésies*, p. 28
- xviii « Dernier rempart contre le libéralisme », in *Poésies*, p. 53
- xix H. P. Lovecraft, pp. 13, 14
- xx H. P. Lovecraft, p. 75
- xxi « Consolation technique », in *Lanzarote* (Paris: Libro, 2002), p. 87
- xxii André Gide, *Journal* (Paris: Gallimard Pléiade, 1996), vol. I, p. 171, septembre 1893
- xxiii « Comédie métropolitaine », published in the weekly *Les Inrockuptibles* (reprinted in *Rester vivant*, p. 87)
- xxiv « Sortir du XX^e siècle », in *Lanzarote*, p. 76
- xxv Zamyatin, quoted by Michael Glenny, Introduction to Penguin edition of *We*, 1972, p. 11.
- xxvi *Les Particules élémentaires*, pp. 64, 63
- xxvii *Les Particules élémentaires*, pp. 128, 274, 278
- xxviii *Les Particules élémentaires*, pp. 62, 68, 286
- xxix *La poursuite du bonheur*, in *Poésies*, p. 125; *Poésies*, pp. 170, 154
- xxx *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 205
- xxxi *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 64
- xxxii H. P. Lovecraft, p. 90. Houellebecq's italics.
- xxxiii *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, 100-101
- xxxiv « Cieux vides », in *Rester vivant*, p. 59
- xxxv *Le sens du combat*, in *Poésies*, pp. 52-53
- xxxvi *Renaissance*, in *Poésies*, p. 252
- xxxvii *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 194
- xxxviii « Recueillement » (*Les Fleurs du mal*, poèmes ajoutés, no. xxii)
- xxxix *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 316
- xl H. P. Lovecraft, p. 150
- xli E. F. Bleiler, Introduction to H. P. Lovecraft's *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), p. iv
- xlii *Poésies*, pp. 34, 40, 19, 20
- xliii « Consolation technique », in *Lanzarote*, p. 87; and « Non réconcilié », in *La poursuite du bonheur*, *Poésies*, p. 114
- xliv *Poésies*, 31; *Lanzarote*, p. 19
- xlvi *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 167
- xlvi *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 162; see also pp. 270-1

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- xlvi André Comte-Sponville, *Présentation de la philosophie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000), translated by F. Wynne as *The Little Book of Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 2004), p. 105
- xlvi Comte-Sponville, p. 106, my amendment of Wynne's translation.
- xlix *L'amour, tel qu'il existe dans la société, n'est que l'échange de deux fantaisies et le contact de deux épidermes* (Chamfort, *Maximes, pensées et anecdotes*, 1795)
- ¹ *Ce que j'appelle cristallisation, c'est l'opération de l'esprit, qui tire de tout ce qui se présente la découverte que l'objet aimé a de nouvelles perfections* (Stendhal, *De l'amour*, 1822)
- li *Poésies*, p. 128
- lii « Jacques Prévert est un con », in *Rester vivant*, pp. 67-68
- liii *Poésies*, p. 129; « Ciel, terre, soleil », in *Lanzarote*, p. 93; *Poésies*, pp. 31, 74