

## Much Ado About Michel

**Michel Houellebecq, *The Elementary Particles*, Vintage, NY, 2001, translated by Frank Wynne (orig. published 1998); Platform, Vintage, NY, 2002, translated by Frank Wynne**

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The French literary scene has apparently been galvanized by *l'affaire Houellebecq*, with various cultural bigwigs declaring themselves either thrilled or outraged by the work of this *enfant maudit*, a sullen ex-computer programmer in his mid-40s who has taken the book community by storm. The French critic Frederic Badre described *The Elementary Particles* (originally published in an earlier translation as *Atomized*) as “the first 21st century novel,” and its author—characterized by interviewers as a chain-smoking, inarticulate, alcoholic misogynist—as “the first novelist who is not a humanist.” (As if that’s a bad thing...)

*The Elementary Particles*, which has sold several hundred thousand copies, tells the story of two miserable half-brothers. One, Bruno, grows up into a pathetic loser obsessed with sex, whose brief mid-life escape into erotic abandon is cut cruelly short when his ailing lover cripples herself during an over-enthusiastic bout of orgiastic sex. The second brother, Michel, is a dry and emotionless physicist whose work in quantum mechanics is devoted to ridding the human race of its annoying need for sexual release and genetic difference. Rather than complete opposites, Bruno and Michel are actually remarkably similar creatures, which is Houellebecq’s basic point. The offspring of care-free sixties hippies, they both share a deep-seated cynicism for the notion that life has any meaning beyond the genetic imperative to reproduce, which—as their own case shows—generally leads to tragic consequences. Both are almost totally estranged from human relationships, and Bruno’s humiliating life bears out Michel’s proposal—that human beings are better off without their messy and complicated sexual urges.

*Platform* proposes a similar, though perhaps less radical solution. In this novel, more conventional in structure, the hero—another disheveled, cynical loser—embarks on a tour of Thailand where he meets and falls in love with Valérie, a sexually obliging travel agent. Believing that western women are too selfish and

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demanding to make compatible partners, Michel proposes a resolution to the dilemma in sexual tourism, the ultimate fusion of sex and commerce, where wealthy westerners are offered a menu of erotic opportunities by obliging third worlders grateful for their money and attention. With Valérie's practical expertise, the two begin setting up a business, which seems about to be fantastically profitable and idyllic until one of their sex resorts is the target of a bomb planted by "Islamic fanatics."

For a writer with a reputation for cynical despair, there's an awful lot of sex in Houellebecq, much of it tender and loving. And even though the participants may be older and a little more world-weary than one might expect, Houellebecq's erotic scenes tend to be drawn from those idealized encounters typical of modern pornography, where everyone is consistently open-minded, tireless and insatiable—even though, in Houellebecq, the unattainable utopia of pornography is, at least in part, responsible for our anonymous, atomized social structure.

It is as a stylist that I find Houellebecq most interesting (and I'm assuming the seamless translation is equally reliable in reproducing the author's original feel and tone); he has been compared with Céline and Camus, and his evocation of the latter is clearly deliberate (*Platform* begins with the words "Father died last year," overtly echoing the famous opening of Camus's existential classic, *The Outsider*). Both *Platform* and *The Elementary Particles* present odd, dislocating juxtapositions of sociological discourse, angry rants, unexpected details and apparent *non-sequiteurs* that, in fact, echo of the hopeless, fragmented lives of Houellebecq's characters. Here, for example, is the sad, funny opening of chapter 15 from *The Elementary Particles*.

They took a taxi to Les Halles and ate in an all-night brasserie. Bruno had pickled herring as a first course. Now, he thought, anything is possible. Almost immediately he realized he was wrong, though the possibilities were endless in his imagination: he could imagine himself as a sewer rat, a saltcellar or a field of pure energy, but in reality his body was in a slow process of decay; Christiane's body was too. Despite the nights they spent together, each remained trapped in individual consciousness and separate flesh. Pickled herring was clearly not the solution, but then again, had he chosen sea bass with fennel it would've been no different.

As a matter of fact, it wasn't until I'd finished both novels that I learned about Houellebecq's controversial "bad boy" reputation; I was familiar with his name, and knew of him as a French intellectual; frankly, I found it hard to fathom why this pair of novels had stirred up such a fuss. It seems to be something of a storm in a teacup, since there's really nothing more objectionable in Houellebecq than an unfashionable attitude to sex and politics. True, there's a lot of explicit descriptions of sexual activity, but certainly no more than in the work of writers like Norman Mailer or Henry Miller. True, Houellebecq's protagonists are not exactly politically correct (it was on these grounds that Houellebecq was thrown out of his Paris literary coterie, "Les Perpendiculaires"), but this is fiction, after all, not a sociological treatise or a political call to arms. Perhaps part of the controversy

relates to the fact that Houellebecq seems to model his protagonists on himself; both are shabby, misogynistic men in their mid-forties named Michel. There was also some fear of an impending fatwa after a smattering of angry Islamics found *Platform*'s belligerent narrator too convincing in his anti-Muslim sentiments, though this seems rather an extreme reaction, especially since the novel stigmatizes a whole host of races and nationalities, including—especially—the French.

What *l'affaire Houellebecq* is really about, as far as I can tell, is the unflinching honesty of the two novel's protagonists, neither of whom censor their thoughts, giving us an unembellished account of what most men think about when they look at women. Houellebecq is turning over some very heavy stones here, and it's hard not to be taken aback by a sudden glimpse of what lies beneath.

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