

Houellebecq and the Popularity of the Crisis of Meaning

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (May 2019)



Urban Malaise, Robert Rauschenberg

Could man be drunk for ever,
With liquor, love or fights,
Lief should I rouse at morning

And lief lie down at nights.

But men at whiles are sober

And think by fits and starts,

And if they think, they fasten

Their hands upon their hearts.

—A. E. Housman

Michel Houellebecq, who has recently been decorated with the *Légion d'honneur*, is the most famous French writer of his generation. Perhaps there are more acute diagnosticians of the malaise of western civilisation in the world (I assume that there is one to be diagnosed), but if so I do not know of him.

We who are intellectuals normally associate the quality of best-sellerdom with triviality or shallowness. Even the concept of best-sellerdom is curious to anyone who likes to think for himself. Why would anyone choose to buy or read a book merely because very large numbers of other people have done so, irrespective of its quality or subject-matter? And yet bookshops everywhere categorise books as best-sellers, as they categorise books by subject matter, such as health and wellbeing, or the Middle East.

Whether or what the sales of a book reflect on its quality depends on the readership. I was once chagrined to meet a man whose mother's books on keeping goats far outsold my accounts

of various civil wars, and indeed provided her with an excellent living. And in these days of on-line merchandising, the disaggregation of the category of best-seller has proceeded to such an extent that almost every book can be presented as a best-seller, for example in the category of Mesopotamian pottery.

Be this all as it may, Michel Houellebecq is certainly a best-seller. The first print run in France of his latest novel, *Sérotonine*, was reported to be 330,000, and certainly I have rarely seen such piles of a single book as I saw in France after its publication. Moreover, they seem to have sold, or else they were removed once they had failed to sell as quickly as anticipated. Overall, though, there is little question as to Houellebecq's popularity, to say nothing of his popularity in other languages.

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It would be quite wrong to conclude from this that he is a mere entertainer (I say *mere*, as if to entertain were either an easy or an unworthy thing to do, though it is of course neither), but entertaining he certainly is. He is also a serious writer and a discomfiting one.

He discomfits us by repeatedly confronting us with the hollowness of our existence in a modern prosperous consumer society, with our tendency to regard the good life as a

prolonged series of pleasurable moments, there being no deeper or transcendent purpose to our lives. He does not propose any solution—he does not tell us to take up basket-weaving or table tennis—or propose anything that might fill the vacuum left by an absence of larger purpose. He writes novels, not self-help manuals.

Any reader of Houellebecq will soon enough recognise his themes, or rather his theme and sub-themes. All his novels appear to have scenes which are frankly pornographic, with detailed and unnecessary descriptions of a certain kind of sex. These are so often repeated that one suspects that they are the author's own fantasies. It is, of course, an elementary error of literary criticism to identify an author's character with an author himself, but when something is repeated book after book, one suspects that it is not mere invention: it is reportage.

Houellebecq is not a prepossessing man physically, to judge from his photographs, rather the reverse, nor does he make any effort to make the best of himself, by (say) being a dandy. Again it is very much the reverse: he makes no effort whatever to appear even clean and tidy. The shower does not appear his natural habitat and though by now he must be a very rich man, he dresses like an average drug addict from a depressed provincial town in France. I suspect that he loves what he hates, or at least criticises with ferocity.

His sex scenes are purely mechanical, so to speak, in so far as they are unaccompanied by any human affection or warmth. I have known people who regarded food as fuel—they had to eat some to keep going—but the consumption of food was for them a biological necessity, and an unfortunate one at that.

Houellebecq's attitude to sex appears analogous. There is a build-up of tension that has to be relieved, but no more than that. It hardly even deserves the name of sensuality. It is an itch that has to be scratched and that is all. As for Houellebecq himself, he seems to be obsessed with fellatio.

But though many people may—and do—find Houellebecq's approach to sex disconcerting and even disgusting, there is a serious point to it; for the fact is that the protagonists and narrators of his novels not only find sex to have no transcendent qualities, they find everything else equally lacking in it. They are entirely disillusioned with life, though whether they ever had any illusions in the first place is not clear (can you be disillusioned without having been first illusioned?). Though they are educated, with what would usually be called good jobs, and have no financial difficulties to speak of, yet they are in the grip of a vague malaise, that of a meaningless existence. In his latest book, for example, the narrator and protagonist is an agricultural engineer whose work has always been (to him) absurd, for example trying to promote the sales of a certain cheese worldwide, while the French countryside, traditionally that of peasant farmers, falls apart as a social system because of its increasing takeover by agribusiness. This process can indeed be seen in much of France, where many towns that used to serve the surrounding farming population have lost their *raison d'être* and now strike the visitor as ghost towns complete with living ghosts. The only solution for many of the more enterprising inhabitants is to decamp for the larger cities but such a solution only makes the situation—from the small towns' point of view—worse. This is a downward spiral from which it is difficult to see any other than an individual escape. The number of people who can work from home is still not infinite; the knowledge economy will not return prosperity to rural France, at least not soon enough for those who are

now living in it.

Houellebecq has the reputation as a seer. In previous books he foresaw the rise of Islamic terrorism in France; in *Sérotonine*, which must have been written before the eruption of the *Gilets Jaunes* movement (if any group as acephalous as they can be called a movement), though published after it had been going for a few weeks, he foresaw widespread protests in the countryside in which farmers and others block crossroads. His guesses as to future developments seem to be more than merely lucky.

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On practically every page of his books one finds a kind of irony that is at once delicious and disconcerting. I open *Sérotonine* at random and here is what I find on page 116:

In retrospect, the most remarkable thing is that the totality of my possessions fitted into a suitcase. I had decidedly little taste for the possessions of this earth; which, in the eyes of certain Greek philosophers (the Epicureans? The Stoics? The Cynics? Perhaps all three?) is a very favourable mental disposition; the opposite opinion, it seems to me, has rarely been maintained; there has therefore, been on this precise question a *consensus* among philosophers—which is sufficiently rare as to be worth

emphasising.

This short passage suggests a great deal. Philosophers generally don't agree; when on the rare occasions they do agree, it has little or no effect on anyone's behaviour. We all know, and have known for a long time, that money cannot buy you happiness, that you cannot take it with you when you go, etc.; but we (or many of us) continue to pursue it as if it were the *summum bonum* of human existence. This in turn raises the question of Man's rationality and the connection between his knowledge and belief on the one hand and his action on the other. Finally, the narrator's "favourable mental disposition" does conduce to his own happiness. If materialism is not the solution to Man's search for contentment and happiness, neither is its abjuration. Perhaps – probably – there is not such solution.

The author of *Sérotonine* is a man who respects none of those modern pieties that have gone a fair way to replacing religious belief, but which lack religious belief's capacity for the beautiful, the sublime or the consolatory. Among these pieties, of course, is environmentalism, which carried to extremes is a markedly pagan belief, rather than a mere desire to preserve the Earth from complete despoliation, which surely all people now share. Some go so far as to desire the end of the human race so that Gaia, or some such, may survive; an increasing number of young people think it is wrong to have children because to have them will consume the world's resources. On the other hand, he is no praise-singer of the giant corporation. Here is Houellebecq's narrator on the question of genetically-modified crops and agribusiness:

To tell the truth, I felt myself more and more ill at ease

in my job. Nothing had established the dangerousness of organically-modified crops, and the radical ecologists were for the most part ignorant imbeciles, but nothing had established their safety either, and my superiors in the company [for which he worked] were quite simply pathological liars.

Imbeciles or liars: that seems to be the choice offered to us time and again in the modern world as Houellebecq conceives it.

No writer known to me has such finely-attuned antennae for the absurd, which he brings to our attention with a withering scorn. His narrator relates his time as a student of agronomy and agricultural engineering at the premier college in France for such subjects (Houellebecq actually studied agronomy there). His best friend is called Aymeric who smokes a lot of dope and in the first year at the college “had a rather typical grunge look, but with him it went further than Nirvana and Pearl Jam, he really went back to the source, and in his room all the shelves were stacked with vinyl with hundreds of vinyl records of the 1960s and 1970s: Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, The Who, he even had the Doors, Procul Harem, Jimi Hendrix, Van der Graaf Generator . . .”

Then “he arrived [back at college after the vacation] with short hair and an entirely new wardrobe, and when he did his work-experience placement at the end of his studies at Danone [the largest dairy product company in the world] he was dressed in a complete suit and tie . . . He had done most of his work-experience in Danone’s marketing department, and one could reasonably have expected that the rest of his career would be devoted to conceiving new yoghurt drinks or new

smoothies.”

Conceiving new yoghurt drinks and new smoothies: could anything be more absurd, more unnecessary, for an intelligent and educated man, or indeed for anyone else to do? What pre-existing human need could be fulfilled by a new yoghurt drink or a new smoothie? Here the sheer ludicrousness of our consumer society, in which some kind of happiness is sought in redundant and worthless products, is exposed. And yet at the same time we know that the whole economic machine must continue, or we shall fall into penury. Modern meaninglessness is inescapable.

Then, unexpectedly, Aymeric makes an unusual decision: he announces that he is going to run a farm on his ancestral lands. The narrator tells us:

Agronomists are present in almost all the domains of agribusiness, sometimes in technical posts, most often in management, but it almost never happens that they themselves become farmers . . . in looking at the list of graduates of the college, I saw that Aymeric was the only one in our year to make this choice.

In this passage, Houellebecq takes aim—and his aim is unflinching—at the absurdity of modern tertiary education, in which whatever is studied is of neither vocational nor intellectual, cultural nor spiritual, value. His wit is rapier-like; his books relentlessly confront us with our own vacuity. But we enjoy it, in a strange way: It is naught, it is naught, saith the buyer: but when he is gone his way, then

he boasteth.

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