

Michel Houellebecq, The Art of Fiction No. 206



“Do you like the Stooges?” Michel Houellebecq asked me on the second day of our interview. He put down his electric cigarette (it glowed red when he inhaled, producing steam instead of smoke) and rose slowly from his futon couch. “Iggy Pop wrote some songs based on my novel *The Possibility of an Island*,” he offered. “He told me it’s the only book he has liked in the last ten years.” France’s most famous living writer flipped open his MacBook and the gravelly voice of the punk legend filled the kitchenette, chanting: “It’s nice to be dead.”

Michel Houellebecq was born on the French island of La Réunion, near Madagascar, in 1958. As his official Web site states, his bohemian parents, an anesthesiologist and a mountain guide, “soon lost all interest in his existence.” He has no pictures of himself as a child. After a brief stay with his maternal grandparents in Algeria, he was raised from the age of six by his paternal grandmother in northern France. After a period of unemployment and depression, which led to several stays in psychiatric units, Houellebecq found a job working tech support at the French National Assembly. (The members of parliament were “very sweet,” he says.)

A poet since his university days, he wrote a well-regarded study of the American science-fiction writer H. P. Lovecraft in 1991. At the age of thirty-six, he published his first novel, *Whatever* (1994), about the crushingly boring lives of two computer programmers. The novel attracted a cult following and

inspired a group of fans to start *Perpendiculaire*, a magazine based on a movement they called “depressionism.” (Houellebecq, who accepted an honorary place on the masthead, says he “didn’t really understand their theory and, frankly, didn’t care.”) His next novel, *The Elementary Particles* (1998), a mixture of social commentary and blunt descriptions of sex, sold three hundred thousand copies in France and made him an international star. So began the still fierce debate over whether Houellebecq should be hailed as a brilliant realist in the great tradition of Balzac or dismissed as an irresponsible nihilist. (One flummoxed *New York Times* reviewer called the novel “a deeply repugnant read.” Another described it as “lurch[ing] unpleasantly between the salacious and the psychotic.”) The *Perpendiculaire* staff was offended by what they saw as his reactionary denunciation of the sexual-liberation movement and booted him from the magazine.

Several years later, his mother, who felt she had been unfairly presented in certain autobiographical passages of the novel, published a four-hundred-page memoir. For the first and last time in his public life, Houellebecq received widespread sympathy from the French press, who were forced to concede that even the harsh portrait of the hippie mother in *The Elementary Particles* didn’t do justice to the self-involved character that emerged from her autobiography. During her book tour, she famously asked, “Who hasn’t called their son a sorry little prick?”

In 2001, Houellebecq published *Platform*, about a travel agency that decides to aggressively promote sexual tourism in Thailand. In the novel this leads to a terrorist attack by Muslim extremists. Some views expressed by his main character (“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”) led to charges of misogyny and racism, which Houellebecq has yet to live down, to his evident dismay. “How do you have the nerve to write some of the things you do?” I asked him. “Oh, it’s easy. I just pretend that I’m already dead.”

During an interview while promoting *Platform*, Houellebecq made his now notorious statement: “Et la religion la plus con, c’est quand même l’Islam.” (An unsatisfying mild translation is “Islam is the stupidest religion.”) He was sued by a civil-rights group for hate speech and won on the grounds of freedom of expression. “I didn’t think Muslims had become a group that took offense at everything,” he explains. “I knew that about the Jews, who are always ready to find a strain of anti-Semitism somewhere, but with the Muslims, honestly, I wasn’t up to speed.” In 2005, he published *The Possibility of an Island*, about a future race of clones.

Given Houellebecq’s reputation for getting drunk and making passes at his female interviewers, I was slightly apprehensive as I rang the doorbell of his modest short-term rental in Paris. But during the two days we spent together, he was scrupulously polite and rather shy. Wearing an old flannel shirt and slippers, he was clearly suffering from a bout of his chronic eczema. He spent most of the interview seated on the futon, smoking. (He is trying to cut down from four packs a day, hence the electric cigarette.) We spoke French and, very occasionally, English, a language Houellebecq understands quite

well. Each of my questions met with a funereal silence, during which he blew smoke and closed his eyes. More than once I began to wonder whether he had fallen asleep. Eventually the answer would emerge, in an exhausted monotone which grew only slightly less weary the second day. His follow-up e-mails were whimsical and charming.

Houellebecq has won many major French literary prizes, though not the coveted Goncourt, which many in the French literary establishment feel has been unfairly withheld. He has also published several volumes of poetry and essays. Some of his poems have been set to music, and Houellebecq has performed them in Parisian nightclubs. France's first lady, Carla Bruni-Sarkozy has also recorded a song based on his poetry. Most recently, Bernard-Henri Lévy, the other public intellectual the French love to hate, collaborated with him on *Public Enemies*, an exchange of letters between the two men, which is scheduled to appear in translation next winter. His latest novel, *La Carte et le Territoire*, appears in France this September.

Currently single, Houellebecq is twice divorced and has a son by his first marriage. Since 2000, he has lived on Ireland's west coast and spends his summers at his condominium in Andalusia.

INTERVIEWER

Who are your literary precursors?

HOUELLEBECQ

Recently I've wondered. My answer has always been that I was very struck by Baudelaire, by Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, by Dostoyevsky and, a little later, by Balzac. All of which is true. These are people I admire. I also love the other Romantic poets, Hugo, Vigny, Musset, Nerval, Verlaine, and Mallarmé, both for the beauty of their work and for its terrifying emotional intensity. But I've started to wonder whether what I read as a child wasn't more important.

INTERVIEWER

Like what?

HOUELLEBECQ

In France, there are two classic authors for children, Jules Verne and Alexandre Dumas. I always preferred Jules Verne. With Dumas, the whole historical thing bored me. Jules Verne had this exhaustive vision of the world that I liked. Everything in the world seemed to interest him. I was also very struck by the tales of Hans Christian Andersen. They upset me. And then there was *Pif le chien*, a comic book published by Editions Vaillant and sponsored by the Communist Party. I realize now when I reread it that there was a Communist bent to many of Pif's adventures. For example, a prehistoric man would bring down the local sorcerer in single combat and explain to the tribe that they didn't need a sorcerer and that there was no need to fear thunder. The series was very innovative and of

exceptional quality. I read Baudelaire oddly early, when I was about thirteen, but Pascal was the shock of my life. I was fifteen. I was on a class trip to Germany, my first trip abroad, and strangely I had brought the *Pensées* of Pascal. I was terrified by this passage: “Imagine a number of men in chains, all under sentence of death, some of whom are each day butchered in the sight of the others; those remaining see their own condition in that of their fellows, and looking at each other with grief and despair await their turn. This is an image of the human condition.” I think it affected me so deeply because I was raised by my grandparents. Suddenly I realized that they were going to die and probably soon. That’s when I discovered death.

INTERVIEWER

What other authors affected you?

HOUELLEBECQ

I read a lot of science fiction. H. P. Lovecraft and Clifford Simak. *City* is a masterpiece. Also Cyril Kornbluth and R. A. Lafferty.

INTERVIEWER

What attracts you to science fiction?

HOUELLEBECQ

I think sometimes I need a break from reality. In my own writing, I think of myself as a realist who exaggerates a little. But one thing definitely influenced me in *The Call of Cthulhu* by H. P. Lovecraft: his use of different points of view. Having a diary entry, then a scientist’s log, followed by the testimony of the local idiot. You can see that influence in *The Elementary Particles*, where I go from discussions of animal biology, to realism, to sociology. If not for science fiction, my biggest influences would all belong to the nineteenth century.

INTERVIEWER

You are a fan of the nineteenth-century social reformers, especially Auguste Comte, the founder of Positivism.

HOUELLEBECQ

Most people find Comte unreadable because he repeats himself to the point of madness. And medically speaking, he certainly wasn’t far from insanity. As far as I know, he is the only philosopher who tried to commit suicide. He threw himself into the Seine because of a broken heart. They pulled him out and he spent six months in a sanatorium. And this was the father of Positivism, which is considered to be the height of rationalism.

INTERVIEWER

You've said that you are "an old Calvinist pain-in-the-ass." What do you mean?

HOUELLEBECQ

I tend to think that good and evil exist and that the quantity in each of us is unchangeable. The moral character of people is set, fixed until death. This resembles the Calvinist notion of predestination, in which people are born saved or damned, without being able to do a thing about it. And I am a curmudgeonly pain in the ass because I refuse to diverge from the scientific method or to believe there is a truth beyond science.

INTERVIEWER

You have a bit of a scientific background. After high school, you studied agronomy. What is agronomy?

HOUELLEBECQ

It's everything having to do with the production of food. The one little project I did was a vegetation map of Corsica whose purpose was to find places where you could put sheep. I had read in the school brochure that studying agronomy can lead to all sorts of careers, but it turns out that was ridiculous. Most people still end up in some form of agriculture, with a few amusing exceptions. Two of my classmates became priests, for example.

INTERVIEWER

Did you enjoy your studies?

HOUELLEBECQ

Very much. In fact, I almost became a researcher. It's one of the most autobiographical things in *The Elementary Particles*. My job would have been to find mathematical models that could be applied to the fish populations in Lake Nantua in the Rhône-Alpes region. But strangely, I turned it down, which was stupid, actually, because finding work afterward was impossible.

INTERVIEWER

In the end you went to work as a computer programmer. Did you have previous experience?

HOUELLEBECQ

I knew nothing about it. But this was back when there was a huge need for programming and no schools to speak of. So it was easy to get into. But I loathed it immediately.

INTERVIEWER

So what made you write your first novel, *Whatever*, about a computer programmer and his sexually frustrated friend?

HOUELLEBECQ

I hadn't seen any novel make the statement that entering the workforce was like entering the grave. That from then on, nothing happens and you have to pretend to be interested in your work. And, furthermore, that some people have a sex life and others don't just because some are more attractive than others. I wanted to acknowledge that if people don't have a sex life, it's not for some moral reason, it's just because they're ugly. Once you've said it, it sounds obvious, but I wanted to say it.

INTERVIEWER

The poor undesirable Tisserand is a pretty poignant character.

HOUELLEBECQ

He's a good character. Looking back, I was surprised that you could get such an interesting character from just the one springboard of his sexual frustration. The success of Tisserand was a great education.

INTERVIEWER

According to the narrator in *Whatever*, "one hates the young."

HOUELLEBECQ

That's the other part of the trap. The first is professional life, the fact that nothing else is going to happen to you. The second is that now there's this person who will replace you and who will have experiences. This leads to the natural hatred of the father for his son.

INTERVIEWER

The father and not the mother?

HOUELLEBECQ

Yes. There is some kind of physiological and psychological change in a woman when she gets pregnant. It's animal biology. But fathers don't give a shit about their offspring. Hormonal things occur, things that no culture can do anything about, that generally make women like children and men basically not give a damn.

INTERVIEWER

What about marriage?

HOUELLEBECQ

I think that there is a sharp contrast for most people between life at university, where they meet lots of people, and the moment when they enter the workforce, when they basically no longer meet anyone. Life becomes dull. So as a result people get married to have a personal life. I could elaborate but I think everyone understands.

INTERVIEWER

So marriage is just a reaction to . . .

HOUELLEBECQ

To a largely solitary life.

INTERVIEWER

You had trouble finding a publisher for *Whatever*. Why were editors rejecting it?

HOUELLEBECQ

I have no idea. But it didn't look much like anything that was being published at the time. I think Le Clézio was considered a great writer, for example.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of Le Clézio, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2008?

HOUELLEBECQ

I haven't read him. I tried and I got bored. But as far as what was being published, there was a lot of art for art's sake, people writing in the tradition of the *nouveau roman*. There was nothing about people with office jobs.

INTERVIEWER

So you are not a fan of the *nouveau roman*?

HOUELLEBECQ

Every now and then, I like to indulge some materialist theory. One of which is that the Livres de Poche [the French paperback collection of classics] completely changed the transmission of culture and made it more international and less cohesive. I never studied literature at university. The *nouveau roman* wasn't published in Livres de Poche, so I never read one until much later. Too late really—the brain

atrophies.

INTERVIEWER

And what about poetry?

HOUELLEBECQ

I think poetry is the only domain where a writer you like can truly be said to influence you, because you read and reread a poem so many times that it simply drills itself into your head. A lot of people have read Baudelaire. I had the more unusual experience of reading virtually all of Corneille. No one reads Corneille, but I came across a little pile of classics, and for some reason, I loved it. I loved the alexandrine, the traditional twelve-syllable verse. When I was at university, I wrote quite a bit of classical verse in tetrameters, which appealed to the other poets. They said, Hey, that's not bad. Why not write in classical verse? It can be done.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think of yourself as a poet as well as a novelist?

HOUELLEBECQ

Not really. It's sad to say, but when you write novels that have a certain impact, you start to sense that editors are publishing your poems out of charity. And it becomes embarrassing.

INTERVIEWER

But you do put poems in all your novels.

HOUELLEBECQ

But it doesn't work. I've always tried to put poems in my novels, but I've never really succeeded.

INTERVIEWER

You have said, "The struggle between poetry and prose is a constant in my life. If you obey the poetic impulse, you risk becoming unreadable. If you disobey, you're ready for a career as an honest 'storyteller.'"

HOUELLEBECQ

You might get the impression that I have a mild contempt for storytelling, which is only somewhat true. For example, I really like Agatha Christie. She obeys the rules of the genre at first, but then occasionally she manages to do very personal things. In my case, I think I start from the opposite point. At first, I don't obey, I don't plot, but then from time to time, I say to myself, Come on, there's got to be

a story. I control myself. But I will never give up a beautiful fragment merely because it doesn't fit in the story.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of your first novel now?

HOUELLEBECQ

It's brutal, but it's good. That was the beginning of my long relationship with *Les Inrockuptibles*, who loved it instantly.

INTERVIEWER

Les Inrockuptibles?

HOUELLEBECQ

It's a magazine which is devoted roughly one third to music, one third to literature, and one third to everything else. When it was launched [as a monthly in 1986, then as a weekly in 1995], it terrorized the French media because it was so plainly much better than everything else out there. The traditional weeklies with their literary supplements looked ridiculous by comparison. Everyone who counted intellectually in Paris was at their feet. Unfortunately, none of them had a real sense of responsibility and so no one really took charge. Now it's washed up.

INTERVIEWER

What were the values at the beginning?

HOUELLEBECQ

You could say there was only one—a little reality, man! Show us the real world, the things that are happening now, anchored in the real lives of people.

INTERVIEWER

In 1998, you published your now famous second novel, *The Elementary Particles*, about the tragic love lives of a brilliant scientist and his sexually frustrated half-brother. What led you to write it?

HOUELLEBECQ

The real inspiration was the experiments of Alain Aspect in 1982. They demonstrated the EPR paradox: that when particles interact, their destinies become linked. When you act on one, the effect spreads instantly to the other, even if they are great distances apart. That really struck me, to think that if two things are connected once, they will be forever. It marks a fundamental philosophical shift. Ever

since the disappearance of religious belief, the current reigning philosophy has been materialism, which says we are alone and reduces humanity to biology. Man as calculable as billiard balls and completely perishable. That worldview is undermined by the EPR paradox. So the novel was inspired by this idea of what could be the next metaphysical mutation. It has to be less depressing than materialism. Which, let's face it, is pretty depressing.

INTERVIEWER

How did you go from this idea to a story?

HOUELLEBECQ

I started with the central character, Michel, being a physics researcher. Then, because I still felt intense regret at having killed off Tisserand too early in *Whatever*, that led to Bruno, who is an extended Tisserand. This time I got to write his life story. That was a real pleasure. Michel less so because I had to read all these books.

INTERVIEWER

You had to do a lot of quantum-theory research?

HOUELLEBECQ

Oh, it was awful. I remember books that were so difficult that I would reread the same page three times over. It's not bad to make an intellectual effort sometimes, but I doubt I would do it again.

INTERVIEWER

What did you most want to accomplish with the novel?

HOUELLEBECQ

What I really wanted was to have scenes that were, as you say in English, "heartbreaking."

INTERVIEWER

Heartbreaking?

HOUELLEBECQ

The death of Michel's girlfriend was very moving, I think. I really wanted to get those kinds of scene right above all.

INTERVIEWER

And why did you want to get those scenes right in particular?

HOUELLEBECQ

Because that's what I like best in literature. For example, the last pages of *The Brothers Karamazov*: not only can I not read them without crying, I can't even think of them without crying. That's what I admire most in literature, its ability to make you weep. There are two compliments I really appreciate. "It made me weep," and "I read it in one night. I couldn't stop."

INTERVIEWER

Of course, it was the numerous sex scenes that got you a lot of attention in the media.

HOUELLEBECQ

I'm not sure that there are such an unusual number of sex scenes in my novel.

I don't think that's what was shocking. What shocked people was that I depicted sexual failure. I wrote about sexuality in a nonglorifying way. Most of all I described a basic reality: a person filled with sexual desire who can't satisfy it. That's what people don't like to hear about. Sex is supposed to be positive. Showing frustrated sexual desire is obscene. But it's also the truth. The real question is, Who is allowed to have sex? I don't understand, for example, how teachers survive with all these alarming young girls. When women become sexual tourists, that is even more hidden, shameful, and taboo than when men do it. Just as, when a woman professor puts her hand on a student's thigh, it's even worse, even more unspeakable.

INTERVIEWER

A constant refrain in your novels is that sex and money are the dominant values of this world.

HOUELLEBECQ

It's strange, I'm fifty years old and I still haven't made up my mind whether sex is good or not. I have my doubts about money too. So it's odd that I'm considered an ideological writer. It seems to me that I am mostly exposing my doubts. I do have certain convictions. For example, the fact that you can pay a girl, that I think is a good thing. Undeniably. An immense sign of progress.

INTERVIEWER

You mean prostitutes?

HOUELLEBECQ

Yes. I'm all for prostitution.

INTERVIEWER

Why?

HOUELLEBECQ

Because everybody wins. It doesn't interest me personally, but I think it's a good thing. A lot of British and Americans pay for it. They're happy. The girls are happy. They make a lot of money.

INTERVIEWER

How do you know that the girls are happy?

HOUELLEBECQ

I talk to them. It's very difficult because they don't really speak English, but I talk to them.

INTERVIEWER

What about the more commonly held idea that these women are victims who are forced into these circumstances?

HOUELLEBECQ

It's not true. Not in Thailand. It's just stupid to have objections about it.

INTERVIEWER

They say that you are on the right politically because in *The Elementary Particles* you seem to be against the liberalism of the sixties. What do you think of that interpretation?

HOUELLEBECQ

What I think, fundamentally, is that you can't do anything about major societal changes. It may be regrettable that the family unit is disappearing. You could argue that it increases human suffering. But regrettable or not, there's nothing we can do. That's the difference between me and a reactionary. I don't have any interest in turning back the clock because I don't believe it can be done. You can only observe and describe. I've always liked Balzac's very insulting statement that the only purpose of the novel is to show the disasters produced by the changing of values. He's exaggerating in an amusing way. But that's what I do: I show the disasters produced by the liberalization of values.

INTERVIEWER

You have written that you are "not only a religious atheist but a political one." Can you elaborate?

HOUELLEBECQ

I don't believe much in the influence of politics on history. I think that the major factors are technological and sometimes, not often, religious. I don't think politicians can really have a true

historical importance, except when they provoke major catastrophes Napoleon-style, but that's about it. I also don't believe individual psychology has any effect on social movements. You will find this belief expressed in all my novels. I was speaking to someone this morning about Belgium, a country that doesn't work at all. And nobody understands why, from a psychological standpoint, because Belgians themselves seem sympathetic and willing to make it all work. And yet it doesn't. The country is going to disappear. So we have to believe that there are powerful sociological forces at work that cannot be explained in terms of individual psychology.

INTERVIEWER

Were you surprised by the response you got for *Particles*?

HOUELLEBECQ

Yes. I was expecting a success similar to my first novel's. A critical success with modest sales. It was a pivotal moment in my life because I was able to stop working.

INTERVIEWER

Your French critics are irritated by what they see as your cynical use of media to market every book beginning with *The Elementary Particles*. What was your attitude at the time?

HOUELLEBECQ

Back then I thought you had to do a lot of media if you wanted to sell books, and it's true that I really wanted to make money so that I could quit my job. That's the only point of having money, to have the freedom of your days, but it's fundamental. Now I'm not so sure that media sells books.

INTERVIEWER

What sells then?

HOUELLEBECQ

Word of mouth. At the moment, for example, Marc Levy is the biggest seller in France. And he never does any media.

INTERVIEWER

The Elementary Particles is also the novel that made critics focus on your biography because the characters seem to have many points in common with you. But it seems you find it irritating, that people reduce everything to biography.

HOUELLEBECQ

Yes, it's annoying because it denies what is the essential trait of fiction writing, namely, that the characters develop by themselves. In other words, you start with a few real facts and then you let the thing roll with its own momentum. And the further along you get, the more likely you are to leave reality behind altogether. You can't tell your own story in fact. You can use elements of it—but don't imagine that you can control what a character is going to do a hundred pages later. The only thing you can do is, for example, give the character your literary tastes. There's nothing easier. Just have him open a book.

INTERVIEWER

Speaking of your biography, you wrote recently that you had a happy childhood with your grandmother.

HOUELLEBECQ

Yes, my paternal grandmother. I lived with her between the ages of six and eighteen. There were two periods, the first of which was truly happy, between the ages of six and twelve. We lived in the countryside in Yonne. I rode my bike. I built dams. I read a lot. There wasn't much TV. It was good. But then we moved to Crécy-en-Brie. If you went there now, you wouldn't get quite the right idea. It was more rural then. Now it's basically suburban projects. Still I didn't feel as comfortable. There were too many people. I liked the solitude of the countryside.

But frankly, adolescence is never as pleasant as childhood.

INTERVIEWER

And your grandmother was a Communist?

HOUELLEBECQ

That overstates it somewhat. At the time, everyone from a certain social class in France voted Communist, without having a clue who Marx was. It was a class vote.

INTERVIEWER

Did she work?

HOUELLEBECQ

No, she was retired.

INTERVIEWER

What had been her job?

HOUELLEBECQ

She worked for the railroad. I think she had been in charge of the village train station.

INTERVIEWER

Were you close to your grandmother?

HOUELLEBECQ

Yes. I loved her very much.

INTERVIEWER

You have a remarkable sense of humor. Was she funny?

HOUELLEBECQ

No. She didn't joke much.

INTERVIEWER

Was she maternal?

HOUELLEBECQ

Yes. Her four children adored her. She was a very good mother.

INTERVIEWER

Did you see your parents often?

HOUELLEBECQ

My mother, very little. My father, yes. During winter and summer vacations.

INTERVIEWER

Were you close to him?

HOUELLEBECQ

Not really. He was a difficult man to be close to. He was an odd person, a loner really. Still I was closer to him than to my mother. I knew him better.

INTERVIEWER

Until the age of six, you lived with your maternal grandparents in Algeria. Do you remember your early

childhood?

HOUELLEBECQ

Very little. I have vague memories of playgrounds with leaves. I also remember the smell of tear gas, which I liked. I remember little things about the war, like machine-gun fire in the streets.

INTERVIEWER

Was that frightening?

HOUELLEBECQ

No, not at all. Children are amused by that sort of thing.

INTERVIEWER

Was there a lot of reading in your house growing up?

HOUELLEBECQ

My grandparents didn't read at all. They were not educated people.

INTERVIEWER

So how did your life change after *The Elementary Particles*?

HOUELLEBECQ

The biggest consequence of *The Elementary Particles*, apart from the money and not having to work, is that I have become known internationally. I've stopped being a tourist, for example, because my book tours have satisfied any desire I might have to travel. And as a result there are countries I have visited that you wouldn't ordinarily go to, like Germany.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you say that?

HOUELLEBECQ

Nobody does tourism in Germany. It doesn't exist. But they're wrong not to. It's not so bad.

INTERVIEWER

Tourism is the focus of your third novel, *Platform*, about a mainstream travel agency that decides to market sex tours.

HOUELLEBECQ

The hardest thing about writing a novel is finding the starting point, the thing that will open it up. And even that doesn't guarantee success. I basically failed with *Platform*, even though tourism is an excellent point of departure for understanding the world.

INTERVIEWER

What was your fascination with the tourism industry?

HOUELLEBECQ

I find it an absolute pleasure to read travel guides, especially the Michelin guides, and their description of places I know I'll probably never visit. I spend a large part of my life reading descriptions of restaurants. I like the vocabulary they use. I like the way they present the world. I love the descriptions of happiness and discovery. And then there are some basic questions I started to ask myself. China in seven days, for instance. How do they choose the different stages? How do they turn the real world into a pleasant, consumable world?

INTERVIEWER

Tell us about Pattaya, Thailand, where the sex tours take place.

HOUELLEBECQ

I was completely fascinated by Pattaya, where the book's ending takes place. Everyone goes there. The Anglo-Saxons go there. The Chinese go there. The Japanese go there. The Arabs go there, too. That was the strangest part. It was something I read in a guidebook that made me make the trip to Thailand. They said that in one hotel in Bangkok, the Thai prostitutes wore veils to please their Arab clients. I found that fascinating, that adaptability. There are lots of French Algerians from the projects who go to Pattaya for the whores. So the Thai girls speak French but with a ghetto accent. "Ouais, j'tassure! Ouais, ta mère!"

There are karaoke bars for the Japanese, restaurants for Russians with lots of vodka. And there's a poignant side to it, too, something end-of-the-road about all these people, especially the old Anglo-Saxons. You sense they'll never be able to leave. And there's the dust, in the afternoon, when the go-go bars are still closed. There's something very poignant about that moment when the girls start arriving on their scooters and you see the old Anglo-Saxon tourists start to come out like turtles walking in the dust. There is something very, very strange about that town.

INTERVIEWER

The terrorist bombing in Pattaya at the end of the book foreshadowed the real-life nightclub bombing

in Bali the year after the book was published.

HOUELLEBECQ

That wasn't hard to predict. It also could have happened in Malaysia, another Muslim country with lots of prostitutes for Westerners.

INTERVIEWER

But what about your notion that prostitution is a great idea for everyone?

HOUELLEBECQ

Well, Islam would have to disappear. Otherwise it won't work.

INTERVIEWER

So in a perfect world, there is prostitution but not Islam?

HOUELLEBECQ

I never said anything about a perfect world. I said it's not a disaster.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you consider *Platform* a failure?

HOUELLEBECQ

There isn't enough analysis of the tourist industry. And one character, Valerie, dominates the book too much. Not that you can do much about that sort of thing. I liked Valerie as a character and, as a result, I find the male character bland.

INTERVIEWER

You've said book reviewers don't focus enough on the characters.

HOUELLEBECQ

One precious thing about ordinary readers is that sometimes they develop feelings for the characters. This is something critics never discuss. Which is a shame. The Anglo-Saxon critics do good plot summaries but they don't talk about the characters either. Readers, however, do it uninhibitedly.

INTERVIEWER

What about your critics? Can you just sum up briefly what you hold against the French press?

HOUELLEBECQ

First of all, they hate me more than I hate them. What I do reproach them for isn't bad reviews. It is that they talk about things having nothing to do with my books—my mother or my tax exile—and that they caricature me so that I've become a symbol of so many unpleasant things—cynicism, nihilism, misogyny. People have stopped reading my books because they've already got their idea about me. To some degree of course, that's true for everyone. After two or three novels, a writer can't expect to be read. The critics have made up their minds.

INTERVIEWER

When did you first start writing?

HOUELLEBECQ

It's hard for me to say. We had to write creative essays in school, as in "describe a fall afternoon," and it is true that I took a slightly disproportionate pleasure in writing them and that I kept them. Plus, I kept a journal, although I'm not sure what I could have been writing about. I think I was more inclined to describe my dreams than things in my daily life.

INTERVIEWER

What is your writing schedule now?

HOUELLEBECQ

I wake up during the night around one a.m. I write half-awake in a semi-conscious state. Progressively, as I drink coffee, I become more conscious. And I write until I'm sick of it.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have other requirements for writing?

HOUELLEBECQ

Flaubert said you had to have a permanent erection. I haven't found that to be the case. I need to take a walk now and then. Otherwise, in terms of dietary requirements, coffee works, it's true. It takes you through all the different stages of consciousness. You start out semicomatose. You write. You drink more coffee and your lucidity increases, and it's in that in-between period, which can last for hours, that something interesting happens.

INTERVIEWER

Do you plot the novels?

HOUELLEBECQ

No.

INTERVIEWER

You don't know what's happening from one page to the next?

HOUELLEBECQ

I never plan anything at all.

INTERVIEWER

What about your style? You have a habit of making brutal, often amusing juxtapositions, as in "On the day of my son's suicide, I made a tomato omelet."

HOUELLEBECQ

That's not really what I call style. It's just the way I perceive the world. I have a kind of nervousness that leads to rapid juxtapositions. It's not so different from punk rock. You scream but you modulate a little. There have been graduate studies of my style.

INTERVIEWER

What are the conclusions?

HOUELLEBECQ

I have a sentence of medium length with rich punctuation. In other words, my sentences are medium-size but are cut up in a variety of ways. One thing people hate is adverbs. I use adverbs. There's another thing which comes from the fact that I'm a poet. Copy editors always want you to take out repetitions. I like repetitions. Repetition is part of poetry. So I don't hesitate to repeat myself. In fact, I think I am the most repetitive novelist writing today.

INTERVIEWER

You love citing product names. For example, "loup au cerfeuil Monoprix Gourmet" ["Monoprix Gourmet sea bass with chervil"].

HOUELLEBECQ

"Sea bass with chervil . . ." It's appealing. It's well written. I also use product names because they are, objectively, part of the world I live in. But I do, it's true, tend to choose the product with the most enticing name. For example the word *chervil* is very attractive, though I have no idea what chervil is.

You want to eat something with chervil. It's pretty.

INTERVIEWER

You've written that one source of inspiration is the stories people tell you about their lives. Apparently, strangers like to confess things to you.

HOUELLEBECQ

I think I could have been one of the best psychiatrists in the world because I give the impression of being nonjudgmental. Which isn't quite true. Sometimes I am very shocked by what I'm being told. I just don't show it.

INTERVIEWER

You wrote a biography of H. P. Lovecraft and I was struck by the similarity between his own disastrous love story and the ones in your books.

HOUELLEBECQ

Yes, the woman who is courageous and dynamic and does everything she can to make it work and the man who is hapless and incompetent.

INTERVIEWER

What is your concept of the possibility of love between a man and a woman?

HOUELLEBECQ

I'd say that the question whether love still exists plays the same role in my novels as the question of God's existence in Dostoyevsky.

INTERVIEWER

Love may no longer exist?

HOUELLEBECQ

That's the question of the moment.

INTERVIEWER

And what is causing its disappearance?

HOUELLEBECQ

The materialist idea that we are alone, we live alone and we die alone. That's not very compatible with

love.

INTERVIEWER

Your last novel, *The Possibility of an Island*, ends in a desolate world populated by solitary clones. What made you imagine this grim future in which humans are cloned before they reach middle age?

HOUELLEBECQ

I am persuaded that feminism is not at the root of political correctness. The actual source is much nastier and dares not speak its name, which is simply hatred for old people. The question of domination between men and women is relatively secondary—important but still secondary—compared to what I tried to capture in this novel, which is that we are now trapped in a world of kids. Old kids. The disappearance of patrimonial transmission means that an old guy today is just a useless ruin. The thing we value most of all is youth, which means that life automatically becomes depressing, because life consists, on the whole, of getting old.

INTERVIEWER

In your preface to *The Possibility of an Island*, you mentioned a journalist who inspired the idea for the novel. Can you explain?

HOUELLEBECQ

It was a pretty strange moment. I was in Berlin at a café on a lake, waiting to be interviewed. It was very quiet. It was ten o'clock in the morning. There was no one around. And this German journalist arrives and, it was very curious, she wasn't behaving normally. She didn't have a tape recorder and she wasn't taking notes. And she said, "I had a dream that you were in a phone booth after the end of the world and you were speaking to all of humanity but without knowing whether anyone was listening." It was like being in a zombie film.

INTERVIEWER

And that lead to the main premise of the book: a clone who writes a journal meant for his successor.

HOUELLEBECQ

I thought about the situation: I'm in a phone booth after the end of the world and I seem to be talking, but I don't know whether there's anyone on the end of the line or if I'm talking to myself, just to hear my own voice. And it did seem like a striking metaphor for all my novels. The idea took a while to bear fruit. I wrote my third novel in the meantime. Then I bought an apartment in the south of Spain and went in the off-season, January, and there was nobody there. I was in this deserted beach house which gave me the impression of being alone at the end of humanity. I wrote the first pages. For a long time, I

wrote nothing more.

INTERVIEWER

How did you become interested in the Raël sect, which inspired the bizarre religious sect in the book?

HOUELLEBECQ

I bought books on cults. I went to an orientation session for non-Raélians.

INTERVIEWER

And what happened?

HOUELLEBECQ

There were panel discussions with the prophet who told us things were going to get much better thanks to science. It's a mix of total optimism about scientific progress and nonmoralism about sex. That's what attracts participants. They say that there are extraterrestrials who are way ahead of us and can bring us their recipes for technological happiness.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you make your main character a comedian?

HOUELLEBECQ

The character came from two things. First of all, I went to a resort in Turkey and there was one of those talent shows produced by the guests. There was this girl—she must have been fifteen—who was doing Céline Dion and clearly for her, this was very, very important. I said to myself, Man, this girl is really going for it. And it's funny because the next day, she was sitting alone at the breakfast table and I thought, Already the solitude of the star! I sensed that something like that can decide an entire life. So the comedian has a similar experience. He discovers all of sudden that he can make whole crowds laugh and it changes his life. The second thing was that I knew a woman who was editor in chief of a magazine and she was always inviting me to these hip events with Karl Lagerfeld, for example. I wanted to have someone who was part of that world.

INTERVIEWER

Like the comedian, you compulsively take the politically sensitive subjects of the moment and then are irreverent to the point of insult. And it's funny. It makes you laugh out of shock.

HOUELLEBECQ

You laugh because the insult claims merely to state the obvious. This may be unusual in literature but

it isn't in private life. "Well, you have to admit, Islam is moronic" is something you could easily say in private. This sort of slightly apologetic statement seems to me a part of French culture. For example, a girl was telling me about a friend who was pretty ugly and was fighting for abortion rights. She was describing their conversation and she said, "I don't mean to be mean, but nobody would want to get her pregnant anyway." In conversations the French use that kind of apologetic insult all the time. There's a common-sense side to it, which I quite like.

INTERVIEWER

You have a special talent for insult. Do you take pleasure in insulting?

HOUELLEBECQ

Yes. It is, I have to say, satisfying.

INTERVIEWER

You've said that you were proud of having made poetry triumph in a novel in the last part of *The Possibility of an Island*. It's when the clone leaves his restricted area without permission to wander the desert in search of another clone.

HOUELLEBECQ

I personally like the last part of *The Possibility of an Island*. I don't think it resembles anything I've done before, but no reviewer has mentioned it. It's hard to explain but I have the feeling that there's something very, very beautiful in that last part. He opens the door, and it's another world. When I wrote that passage I wasn't thinking much about the story, I was completely intoxicated by the beauty of my own words.

I did something special to prepare for that last section. I stopped writing. For two weeks, I did nothing—and I mean nothing. I saw no one. I spoke to no one. In principle, you shouldn't stop when you're writing a novel. If you stop to do something else, it's a catastrophe. But in this case, I stopped to do nothing, just to let the desire grow.

INTERVIEWER

You have said that you are "cyclothymic." What does that mean?

HOUELLEBECQ

It means you go back and forth from depression to exultation. But in the end, I doubt I'm really depressive.

INTERVIEWER

What are you then?

HOUELLEBECQ

Just not very active. The truth is, when I go to bed and do nothing, I'm not badly off. I'm quite content. So it isn't really what you would call depression.

INTERVIEWER

But what stops you from succumbing to what you have said is the greatest danger for you, which is sulking in a corner while repeating over and over that everything sucks?

HOUELLEBECQ

For the moment my desire to be loved is enough to spur me to action. I want to be loved despite my faults. It isn't exactly true that I'm a provocateur. A real provocateur is someone who says things he doesn't think, just to shock. I try to say what I think. And when I sense that what I think is going to cause displeasure, I rush to say it with real enthusiasm. And deep down, I want to be loved despite that.

Of course, there's no guarantee this will last.

INTERVIEWER

Your conversation with Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Public Enemies*, is now out in translation in the United States. What possessed you to do the book?

HOUELLEBECQ

It started out as a bit of a game. I had never done anything like that. What counts is what made us continue and eventually publish, which is simple. We thought the result was interesting.

INTERVIEWER

Why don't you live in France?

HOUELLEBECQ

Partly to pay fewer taxes and partly to learn your beautiful language, madam. And because Ireland is quite beautiful, especially the west.

INTERVIEWER

Not to escape your own country?

HOUELLEBECQ

No. I left in full undisputed glory without any enemies.

INTERVIEWER

And what do you think of this Anglo-Saxon world?

HOUELLEBECQ

You can tell that this is the world that invented capitalism. There are private companies competing to deliver the mail, to collect the garbage. The financial section of the newspaper is much thicker than it is in French papers.

The other thing I've noticed is that men and women are more separate. When you go into a restaurant, for example, you often see women eating out together. The French from that point of view are very Latin. A single-sex dinner would be considered boring. In a hotel in Ireland, I saw a group of men talking golf at the breakfast table. They left and were replaced by a group of women who were discussing something else. It's as if they're separate species who meet occasionally for reproduction. There was a line I really liked in a novel by Coetzee. One of the characters suspects that the only thing that really interests his lesbian daughter in life is prickly-pear jam. Lesbianism is a pretext. She and her partner don't have sex anymore, they dedicate themselves to decoration and cooking.

Maybe there's some potential truth there about women who, in the end, have always been more interested in jam and curtains.

INTERVIEWER

And men? What do you think interests them?

HOUELLEBECQ

Little asses. I like Coetzee. He says things brutally, too.

INTERVIEWER

You've said that you possibly had an American side to you. What is your evidence for this?

HOUELLEBECQ

I have very little proof. There's the fact that if I lived in an American context, I think I would have chosen a Lexus, which is the best quality for the price. And more obscurely, I have a dog that I know is very popular in the United States, a Welsh Corgi. One thing I don't share is this American obsession with large breasts. That, I must admit, leaves me cold. But a two-car garage? I want one. A fridge with one of those ice-maker things? I want one too. What appeals to them appeals to me.

INTERVIEWER

Your much-awaited new novel *La Carte et le Territoire* is about to come out in France but very little is known about it. I read that it is a five-hundred-page book which “examines contemporary society through the prism of an artist’s success.” Apparently you are a character in it. Is this correct?

HOUELLEBECQ

The novel is only four hundred and fifty pages. The main character is an artist. Houellebecq remains a secondary character though his appearance does make the structure much more complicated. I don’t really want to say more.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think is the appeal of your work, in spite of its brutality?

HOUELLEBECQ

There are too many answers. The first is that it’s well written. Another is that you sense obscurely that it’s the truth. Then there’s a third one, which is my favorite: because it’s intense. There is a need for intensity. From time to time, you have to forsake harmony. You even have to forsake truth. You have to, when you need to, energetically embrace excessive things. Now I sound like Saint Paul.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean?

HOUELLEBECQ

“Now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.” For me the sentence would be “Now abideth beauty, truth, and intensity; but the greatest of these is intensity.”

INTERVIEWER

You once wrote in your biography of H. P. Lovecraft “No aesthetic creation can exist without a certain voluntary blindness.”

HOUELLEBECQ

Yes, it’s true that you have to choose your family, so to speak. You have to exaggerate a little.

INTERVIEWER

Who would you say is your family?

HOUELLEBECQ

It may surprise you, but I am convinced that I am part of the great family of the Romantics.

INTERVIEWER

You're aware that may be surprising?

HOUELLEBECQ

Yes, but society has evolved, a Romantic is not the same thing that it used to be. Not long ago, I read de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. I am certain that if you took, on the one hand, an old-order Romantic and, on the other hand, what de Tocqueville predicts will happen to literature with the development of democracy—taking the common man as its subject, having a strong interest in the future, using more realist vocabulary—you would get me.

INTERVIEWER

What is your definition of a Romantic?

HOUELLEBECQ

It's someone who believes in unlimited happiness, which is eternal and possible right away. Belief in love. Also belief in the soul, which is strangely persistent in me, even though I never stop saying the opposite.

INTERVIEWER

You believe in unlimited, eternal happiness?

HOUELLEBECQ

Yes. And I'm not just saying that to be a provocateur.