Michel Houellebecq's Quietism

by Jonathan Gondelman

Michel Houellebecq should not be so compulsively readable nor so consistently interesting. His characters, who discuss their philosophical views with each other in long conversations, are little more than cyphers for whichever particular mode of thought Houellebecq wishes to excoriate or praise, and the plots of his books consist more or less in a catalogue of degeneracies which often lapse into the pornographic. He writes “novels of ideas” which contain the same sordid matters one finds in the tabloids. They should be trite, but they read as fiery, vital, and impassioned stories because the ideas which motivate his characters anguish or sustain their lives. Houellebecq’s novels are populated by two types: hedonists who understand that their narcissism will eventually leave them utterly isolated and by quietists who want nothing more than to be left alone to dream unrealizable utopian dreams.

Jed Martin, the artist protagonist of Houellebecq’s latest, The Map and the Territory, falls into the latter camp. His artistic career concerns documentation: he photographs manufactured objects just to note their existence. Later, he turns to painting portraits of various professionals, ranging from Bill Gates and Steve Jobs to Aimee, Call Girl. His life, like that of most Houellebecq characters, is devoid of any great human interaction: he dates Olga, who works for Michelin and publicizes Jed’s photographs, until the company transfers her out of France. He sees his father only to suffer through mostly silent Christmas dinners. And he befriends the author Michel Houellebecq, himself a character in his own novel, hired by Jed’s gallerist to write a piece for an opening.

In Houellebecq, Jed finds a kindred spirit, albeit one much more lecherous and dipsomaniacal than he himself. Both have found, in their artistic endeavors and love of specific brand-name parkas and cameras, shelter from a constantly changing world. Unfortunately, their friendship is cut short by Houellebecq’s (the character’s) murder, at which point the book becomes a satire on
the police procedural, in which Jed Martin plays an important part.

Houellebecq has always enjoyed playing two roles: first, that of a Cassandra, warning of the imminent suicide of Western civilization, and, second, that of a sex-obsessed clown. The pleasure of reading him, and his importance, rests on the way he navigates this contradiction. Both aspects are present in *The Map and the Territory*, albeit each in a muted form; the overall effect of the book is “Houellebecq-lite”.

Like its predecessors, *The Map and the Territory* is a funny book, containing satirical portraits on various French literary and cultural figures, the art world in general, and on Houellebecq himself, but the jokes this time veer dangerously close to mere self-indulgence. After Houellebecq’s brutal murder, so graphic that it becomes farcical, a police officer notes that he “had rarely seen someone with such an awful fucking life.” At one point, Jed calls Houellebecq out after listening to the latter praise Thai brothels: “Now I have the slight impression you’re playing your own role…”

Which is not to say that *The Map and the Territory* dwells entirely in farce. Running throughout the book is a meditation on the way the economic drive can trivialize and destroy: Houellebecq notes the re-packaging of authentic “Frenchness” as a product to be sold to Japanese and Russian tourists. A section towards the end of the book concerns Jed’s attempts to convince his ailing father not to go to a Swiss suicide clinic and, in so doing, raises the question of why Western society, which has so thoroughly rejected the concept of *eudaemonia*, finds itself drawn increasingly towards euthanasia.

Despite its pleasures, however, *The Map and the Territory* is ultimately a disappointing book. It is not an author’s responsibility to definitively answer each and every question he raises, and such answers usually come off as much too pat, but it was difficult to draw a coherent statement from this book. Rather than struggling against the sexual liberation, the ravages of a global economy, or the decline of the intellect, as in his previous novels, Houellebecq merely notes these changes without comment. In so doing, he leaves his readers with the fatalist quietism always implicit in his earlier books: “Then everything becomes calm. There remains only the grass swaying in the wind. The triumph of vegetation is total.”

For more information, read Stefan Beck’s March 2006 article on Houellebecq.

*The Map and the Territory* on Amazon.com.

Jonathan Gondelman was an Editorial Intern at *The New Criterion*. 