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Carole Sweeney. Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013. xx + 215 pp.

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Abstract

Review of Carole Sweeney. *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013. xx + 215 pp.

Keywords

biopolitical neoliberalism, capitalism, despair, economic and social liberation, literature

Carole Sweeney. *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013. xx + 215 pp.

Michel Houellebecq has established himself as France's most controversial author this century. Serving up "cultural pessimism" (8) in a "laconic prose" (71), the "louche," "shambolic," and heavily *médiatisé* (12) Houellebecq (né Michel Thomas) is, nonetheless, commercially successful. (Whether his books are actually read or simply fashionable *accoutrements* is unknown.) Houellebecq appears to relish the accusations—including "misogyny, obscenity, eugenicism, fascism, racism, misanthropy, and general intellectual delinquency" (vii)—hurled by his critics on both sides of the Atlantic. He has also faced legal charges of inciting religious and racial hatred. In short, he and his writings provide ample material for analysis by the senior lecturer in modern literature at Goldsmiths (London), whose previous book covered interwar race, modernism, and primitivism.

Carole Sweeney focuses on the melancholic writer's portrayal, enjoyable and repulsive for an audience spanning the political spectrum, of the "important shift in France's intellectual and political climate" (viii). The book is divided into six chapters. The first and longest retraces the literary and political reception of Houellebecq's second and third novels, *Atomised* (entitled *Elemental Particles* in the U.S.) and *Platform*. Chapter two concentrates on the principal Houellebecquian theme: "market principles have come to determine and define every aspect of human life" (41). In other words, capitalism in its neoliberal "biopolitical" form is the pinnacle of commodification and *échange* (sexual, economic, informational), providing citizens with the appearance of the absolute freedom of choice while submitting themselves to increasingly privatized social relations.

The third chapter focuses on the intellectual and political backlash against 1968 and all that it symbolizes still. Though many French view '68 as the third time of liberation (1789, 1944, 1968), others see it as an unfortunate rupture. *Soixante-huitards* scorn socio-political authority and sexual and economic inequality; their critics, like Houellebecq and Nicolas Sarkozy, bemoan, meanwhile, the collapse of moral and social authority personified by '68 and its Nietzschean-influenced high priests of theory (Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan).

A close reader of her subject's works while providing useful context throughout, Sweeney is sympathetic to the critique of post-industrial neoliberalism, where "labour, mostly invisible and immaterial, is deployed within a vast and complex network of information" (82) and where we "no longer know how to make anything real or useful" (83). At least in fiction, the post-industrial *homo oeconomicus* avoids utter despair by "plung[ing] headlong into the libertine world of erotic indulgence." This attempt at escape is, of course, doomed to disappoint because "sexual desire has become one of the most thoroughly commodified domains of affective human life" (88).

Sweeney's sympathies evaporate when discussing Houellebecq's crude anti-feminism. Sexual liberation and equality? His frequently two-dimensional female characters exist for male carnal consumption and, one could argue, motherly tenderness. He exhibits "a profoundly regressive move against over 50 years of intellectual reflection on the complexities of sex, gender and sexuality," to quote just one of her many zingers, "and in one sweeping gesture, the distinction between nature and culture is collapsed, reinstating a biological essentialism that audaciously ignores most, if not all, modern theories of gender as a social and cultural construction" (113).

Sweeney fleshes out the sex-as-commodity, "biopolitical" theme in the fifth chapter. The discussion will surprise no one who has read the Frenchman's novels. The closing paragraph, however, penetrates to the underlying issue: "But the problem of sex, how to get it in a 'deregulated' libidinal economy, how to make it last" is not Houellebecq's "preoccupation" (147). It is love. When "love, compassion and the possibility of intimate communion" are devoured by the commodification forces of neoliberalism, "then the affective human body is in danger of obliteration" (147).

The sixth chapter pulls tight the analytical thread: Houellebecqian humans "striv[e] even in the context of increasing depressive isolation" caused by the commodification of their bodies, carnal relations, and human affect. Sweeney reads the former computer programmer's oeuvre as an exploration of a "definitively post-anthropological view of humanity" (155) wherein the "determinism of science and technology," i.e., cloning, will destroy provincially human political and ethical concerns, replacing them with a "monocultural, homogenous community" (160). Ever alert to her subject's wiliness, Sweeney wonders, however: "Is Houellebecq really suggesting biotechnology as the sole remedy for existential disillusionment?" (163). A slew of dystopic works springs to mind: *Brave New World*, *1984*, *Blade Runner*, *Zero K*.

For Sweeney, Houellebecq's fascination with the end of humanity, devoid of hope or redemption, qualifies his work as "the literature of despair." It is a cautionary tale of what we can expect of unfettered capitalism: "it will continue to swallow up our lives, loves and feelings and feed them into the machine of exchange" (190). Is there any hope?

Writing clearly, and often sharply, Sweeney deftly situates her subject in France's ever-changing intellectual and political climate. Her study will interest literary and gender scholars, sociologists of knowledge, and historians; perhaps it should be required reading by economists and business leaders who have embraced American-style capitalism and its implicit claims to liberation. Marx's famous dictum of hunting, fishing, cattle herding, and critiquing is replaced with immaterial information manipulation and Thai prostitutes.

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