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Les Particules élémentaires: Self–portrait

Abstract

Perhaps no French novel in the past fifteen years has received more critical attention than Michel Houellebecq's *Les Particules élémentaires* and perhaps none has evoked stronger reactions with regard to the (literary) values it espouses and represents. This (self-)portrait, like any portrait, accents certain features more than others. It concentrates on refuting charges of nihilism, reactionaryism, sexism, and racism; it stresses Houellebecq's novel's attention to form and its thematic clarity as well as its determination to say something rather than nothing; and, through a consideration of its references to various media, arts, and texts, of its pet peeves and true delights, it specifies the nature and ambition of *Les Particules élémentaires*, the kind of text it is or aspires to be.

Keywords

novel, self-portrait, nihilism, reactionarism, sexism, racism, Les Particules élémentaires, Michel Houellebecq

Les Particules élémentaires: Self-portrait

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I was born in 1998 ... No, what follows will not be an autobiography, a life, a circumfessional memoir, or even an autofiction. I will not, except in passing, talk about my origins, my birth, my reception by ordinary readers or by critics, professors, booksellers, and all those that Pascal called “demi-habiles,” ‘semi-skillful’ (Houellebecq, *Interventions* 2 260).¹ I will not, save if it proves irresistible, mention my ancestors, my progenitor, my siblings, my friends: *Extension du domaine de la lutte* ‘Extension of the domain of the struggle’ or *Plateforme*, say, Philippe Djian’s *37, 2 le matin*, *Betty Blue*, Nicolas Ravalec’s *Cantique de la racaille* ‘Canticle of the Scum,’ works by Maurice Dantec, Guillaume Dustan, or Philippe Muray, and all the other insolent books published in the 1990s by a “Nouvelle Génération” that drew on both high and low, classical and popular literature (Houellebecq, *Interventions* 2 233, 257, 258-59). Nor will I waste my time on texts or people I would not want to be with or near. I will not even say their name. What follows will be nothing like the *Journal des Faux-Monnayeurs*, *Journal of The Counterfeiters* either, no record of hopes, elations, or disappointments, and nothing like the book Bernard Frank dreamed of writing: a daily account of what happens when a book comes out, the articles, the letters, the sales, the fights, the parties (*Romans et Essais* ‘Novels and Essays’ 1275). Though I was never one to conceal anything, the autobiographical mode is not quite my cup of tea. Besides, I like repetition more than difference, points rather than lines, poetic ecstasy and not narrative mechanics. So, instead of telling my story, I will draw a self-portrait.

Like any portrait, this one will be variously inflected and certain aspects will be less accented or detailed than others. I will not,

for example, expound on matters of identity, situation, subject, or theme. The back cover of my J'ai lu edition says more than enough about what I am about: "*Les Particules élémentaires* est la chronique du déclin d'une civilisation—la nôtre—, qu'illustre l'existence plate et morose de deux demi-frères, Michel et Bruno, confrontés à leur misérable condition" "*The Elementary Particles* is the chronicle of the decline of a civilization—ours—a decline illustrated by the dull and morose existence of two half-brothers, Michel and Bruno, confronted with their miserable condition.' In addition, many pages have been written about the topics I explore or the points I make.² And I myself was anything but shy when it came to comment on what I was expressing, from the general denunciation of contemporary Western culture, with its unbridled selfishness, frenzied libidinal consumption, and immorality, to the elaborate treatment of loneliness, shame, suffering, death. So clear and open was I, so unpretentious, that many dubbed me *roman à thèse* or, since I am not without subtlety, "*roman à thèse postmoderne*" (Altes 29) 'postmodern thesis novel.' I was also called many other names: nihilist, reactionary, pervert, sexist, racist, mediocre. Now, I do not mind being attacked by idiots. I enjoy it almost as much as intelligent praise (need I point out that I sold in the hundreds of thousands of copies and that I was translated in thirty languages, that I was adapted to the screen in 2006 by Oskar Roehler, that I was named best book of 1998 by *Lire* 'Reading,' that I won the *prix Novembre* and the IMPAC award, and that I should have won the Goncourt?). Still, these silly accusations sometimes get on my nerves. I most certainly distinguish between good and evil, savagery and the moral law. I believe in tenderness and love. I admire Comte, Pascal, Baudelaire. I may be conservative but reactionary, never! Not that there is anything wrong with being reactionary. As Philippe Sollers tells Bruno: "**Tous les grands écrivains sont réactionnaires.** Balzac, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Dostoïevski: que des réactionnaires" (185) 'All the great writers were reactionaries: Balzac, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Dostoyevsky' (153). But for me, loss, degradation, decline are impossible to reverse: there is no going back. Also, anyone who has read me knows that the sex I show is pretty standard. I am definitely anti-Sade (211, 244; 174, 202). Sure, I talk about sex: I am from 1998, for God's sake! And one of the things I am most proud of is the way I talk about sex. What

other novel explores the pleasures of masturbation (surely not *Charlot s'amuse* 'Charlie Has Fun') and the sorrows of premature ejaculation? What other novel features a protagonist with a small dick?³ As for sexism and racism, I suppose it is not PC to speak of sagging breasts and flabby labia, to call feminists sluts, or to say that Islam is "de loin la plus bête, la plus fausse et la plus obscurantiste de toutes les religions" (271) 'by far the most stupid, false and obfuscating of all religions' (222). I suppose it is nicer to mention only "des êtres humains ... qui donnaient littéralement leur vie aux autres dans un esprit de dévouement et d'amour" 'human beings ... who have literally given their lives for others, out of love and devotion' and to add that "[e]n pratique, ces êtres humains étaient généralement des femmes" '[i]n general, such human beings are generally women'(91; 76-77); or else to find a black student's comments smart but not say that he has a big dick (192, 194; 159, 161). How I hate "proper thinking" (Houellebecq, *Interventions* 2 231)! Besides, why should I be equated with Bruno, Christiane, or Desplechin?

Not that I do not like them. That is another thing I am proud of: the characters. I am very much about characters and the narrator says so in the first sentence: "Ce livre est avant tout l'histoire d'un homme qui vécut la plus grande partie de sa vie en Europe occidentale, durant la seconde moitié du XX^e siècle" (7) 'This book is principally the story of a man who lived out the greater part of his life in Western Europe, in the latter half of the twentieth century'(3). He could have spoken of two men (there is Bruno too), two sides of a single entity, as it were, one in art and the other in science, one at the mercy of his sexual desires and the other without desire; but it makes sense for him, as part of the "new humanity" stemming from Michel, to underline the role of the latter. It is a pity, I think, that so many novels no longer try to exploit what makes fiction special: the creation of characters, the illumination of other persons' private lives, the exploration of intimate thoughts and emotions. Anyway, I know how to talk about characters (e.g. 24-26, 227, 307; 19-21, 186, 257). I am good at them: Michel, Bruno, Christiane, Annabelle, Serge Clément ... I do not say much about the way they look and what I say can be pretty general or vague. Michel has sharp features and sad green eyes (19, 29; 14, 23). Annick is pale, fat, and pimply (73; 62). Annabelle is exceptionally beautiful,

with an incredibly pure face, luminous blond hair, and a soft, supple body (231, 235; 191, 193). Yet you can see them. I really think that piling up realistic details is rubbish (cf. Houellebecq, *Extension* 20). Now, some people find that my characters talk too much and do not sound very natural: they sound like mouthpieces for an ideology. That is rubbish too. It comes from a silly bias for novels that are nothing but writing. People do have ideas, they express them, and the same goes for characters. In any case, my characters live. Most of them are ordinary and all are symptomatic of their society (even their names—Djerzinski, Wilkening, Adjila, Karim—prove telling). In fact, they derive from and rest upon sociological or sociobiological principles rather than merely psychological ones. But though the logic they obey is very strict, they are sometimes unpredictable, in line with quantal truths, cultural instabilities, collective hesitations, and I make sure they are affecting.

Anyhow, whether the characters are racist, sexist, fascist, or whatever, I am not. No more than I am Marxist or *gauchiste* (God save us—Houellebecq, *Interventions 2* 221-22—from such pompousness, idiocy, and crass immorality), *engagé* (except against stupidity), existentialist (in spite of my preoccupation with death or decay and of my sometimes—50, 127; 42-3, 105—seeming to echo Sartre and Camus), or post-structuralist: the work of Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, Deleuze is simply ridiculous (314; 262). I am not a relativist either but an absolutist, not a metaphysician but a positivist. I am not pessimistic—do I not show, at the beginning and the end, that we can overcome hatred, fear, and loneliness?—but nor am I reassuringly edifying à la Philippe Claudel (Houellebecq, *Interventions 2* 259). I am not smugly ironic though I sure use irony. I am not stylish, which does not mean that I have no style. I do, and not only in the bits of poetry. I have something to say and I say it. True, I am not well written, elegant, refined (à la Bergounioux, Millet, Makine, or Bianciotti). I am simple and straightforward. Like the world I describe, I am a bit untidy, a bit slack, a bit gray; and, like it, I combine emotion and cool. That is style.

Obviously, I am no formalist. I do not consist in a bunch of clever formal games (what a waste!). I do not aspire to the status of mere ludic object, like a product of the Nouveau Roman, the Nouveau Nouveau Roman, or the Oulipo. That is not to say I am formless or

without interest in questions of form. I may not be enamored with storytelling and I tend to agree with Michel Houellebecq who wrote in *Le Sens du combat, The Art of the Struggle*: “Tous les êtres humains se ressemblent. A quoi bon égrener de nouvelles anecdotes?” (26) ‘All human beings are alike. What good is telling new anecdotes?’ I have always preferred poetry to narrative, immediacy and ecstasy to counting, recounting, accounting, discounting. Just as I have no patience for realist trappings, I have none for the machinery of narrative. My dialogues are not exactly mimetic. I contain a few depictions of scenery—the Lieu du Changement, for instance (99; 82-83)—but I do not waste much time describing the clothes my characters wear, the cars they drive, the places they live in. I use reality effects, especially when it comes to food (e.g. 150, 159, 212; 125-26, 132, 175) but I certainly do not abound in them. Though I can string events together, combine disparate facts into a whole, tell a good story, I quickly get tired of having to tighten screws here and lubricate joints there, of having to worry about continuity and coherence while avoiding predictability, of having to take care of the paraphernalia of narrative. In part, this is why I do not devote much space to group scenes, except, of course, group sex. I do not really bother to show Michel or Bruno with friends or colleagues, which helps to underline separation, and I do not always avoid clumsy transitions or commentary, which adds to my naturalness. Still, as I said, this does not mean that I pay no attention to form. I am divided into five parts—Prologue, “Le Royaume Perdu” “The Lost Kingdom” (or The Past), “Les Moments Etranges” “Strange Moments” (or The Present), “Illimité Emotionnel” “Emotional Infinity” (or The Future), Epilogue—and I devote the same number of chapters (twenty-two) to the Present as to the Past and the Future combined. I also devote roughly the same number of chapters to each of my protagonists, with Bruno, who has much more of a life, dominating the central section while Michel dominates paradise lost and paradise gained. I mimic separation by featuring a large number of sections and stress the contractual basis of narrative by alternating bits of science with bits of sex. I know how to shade my telling with clichés, how to inflect it with corporate, journalistic, or New Age triteness, how to handle free indirect discourse or internal point of view, and I do it quite well. I give a master class on nar-

rative omniscience by using a narrator who speaks for a group, as befits the post-separation age, and who, from far and near, through scientific and empathetic reconstruction, is able to tell it like it was (see Altes 34-38).⁴ In addition to this protean narrator, to going back and forth between porn and wisdom, to multiplying chapters and breaks, beginnings and ends, I devise many ways of injecting variety, creating surprise, countering boredom, being adventurous à la Rivière and Gide: chapter titles and epigraphs, italics or quotation marks, poems, scientific data (physics or biology are much more disconcerting than history or geography), and, last but by no means least, humor. As Walcott says, “[l]’humour ne sauve pas” (291) ‘humor won’t save you’ (241). It is helpful, though; and I am definitely a comic novel.

But, again, form is not the only thing. It is not everything. It is not even the most important thing. I have so much more to offer: characters, ideas, emotions, science, philosophy, poetry ... It is not a matter of doing just anything or of saying just silly things, à la Prévert. But it is also not a matter of just writing because one has nothing to say, à la Robbe-Grillet (see Houellebecq, *Interventions 2* 9-14 and 275-82). It is dealing with essential problems, fundamental questions—regret, heartache, love, death—like Baudelaire and Balzac and Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, or Thomas Mann (cf. Houellebecq, *Interventions 2* 152, 265). I would rather say something as opposed to nothing. I do not need to hide behind form or to bury truth under it and it really pains me to see so many novels waste so much time, technique, and talent to achieve some elegant trivia. I think it is a mistake to want the novel to be a gratuitous construct. I think it is stupid for it to long for purity. Novels can be much more than little games and formalists must know it since they always end up claiming that their trifles and experiments will bring on the Revolution. Like Gide, who wanted to put everything in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, and like my progenitor, I believe that the novel can and should accommodate all matters: “Isomorphe à l’homme, le roman devrait normalement pouvoir tout contenir. ... Les ‘réflexions théoriques,’ par conséquent, m’apparaissent comme un matériau romanesque aussi bon qu’un autre. ... Il en est encore plus évidemment de même de la critique littéraire, artistique ou musicale” (Houellebecq, *Interventions* 7-8) ‘Isomorphic to man, the novel should normally be able

to contain everything. ... “Theoretical reflexions” therefore seem to me as good a novelistic material as any. ... It is even more obviously the same with literary, artistic, or musical criticism.’ This is why I not only contain big chunks of philosophy and science but I also spend a good deal of time defining more or less explicitly what I want to be and what I am.

I have already spoken of my thematic clarity and I could have stressed what I embrace rather than only what I denounce: the moral law (35; 29), the “feminine” (91, 164-65, 311; 76-77, 137, 260), love, tenderness (my favorite verb is snuggle). I could have mentioned some of my comments on “elementary particles” (125, 298-99; 103, 249) or some of my self-definitions: the story of a man responsible for a new era in the history of the world and the story of the end of the preceding era (7-8, 10; 4, 6). I could have pointed to the many passages that, in one way or another, deal with the power of narrative and the nature of fiction. Apart from indicating the importance of narrative details (53; 46) or narrative endings (68, 179-80; 57, 150), for example, and apart from accenting the folding and unfolding capacities of narration (25-26; 20), criticizing the (Sartrean) conflation of character unpredictability with freedom (227; 186), or evoking, like Barthes, the confusion of *post hoc* and *propter hoc* (33; 27), I emphasize the unifying (anti-separative) force of stories by discussing Robert B. Griffiths’s consistent histories (65-66; 55-56). Similarly, I suggest that fiction illuminates human behavior and tells what is usually to remain untold (119, 147; 99, 122-23); I hint at its imagining the unimaginable (201; 167); and, though I grant that it can do no more than evoke concrete objects (201) and be no more than a plausible account of what was (201, 307; 167, 257), I show that it can easily prove as rich as history (316-17; 263-64). Through some of my remarks on other media and other arts, I bring out what prose fiction, in particular, can and cannot do. If I hardly refer to the fine arts, theater, or classical music, I do not stint on more popular forms of representation. Corot, Philippe Perrin (a mediocre artist, that one), and the Viennese Actionists are mentioned a couple of times (34, 211, 232, 251; 28, 174, 191, 207); a Khmer statuette makes one appearance (127; 105); and theater comes in through *Hair*, Shakespeare (overrated), and some silly absurdist skit at the *Lieu du Changement* (48, 128-29, 134; 41, 107, 111). In contrast, dailies and

weeklies, rock and pop, television, movies (snuff films, peep shows, *Infirmières lubriques* ‘Lustful Nurses’ or *Phantom of the Paradise*) are much in evidence and help me make clear what I am after. Photography, which I foreground here and there (23, 57, 78, 142; 17-18, 49, 67, 118), and poetry, which I rely on several times and which both Bruno and Michel turn to, are particularly important (9-10, 182-83, 285-86, 295-96; 5-6, 151-52, 235-36, 246-47). Photography can preserve something from past reality but, unlike prose fiction, it cannot deal with the future or with the passage of time. Moreover, it is less good at evoking touch. As for poetry, which is more basic and more profound than prose, it lies beyond intelligence (I did not say truth) in rendering instants and their force.

I have also spoken of a few figures I love and of a few I despise, of pet peeves and true delights. I could have referred to more on both sides, plus to quite a few in between. In fact, at least once every two or three pages, I evoke an artist, a thinker, a work, a style, which allows me to specify my nature and my aspirations. Among the writers, for instance, there is Péguy: really beautiful stuff and not unlike many of the poems I feature; Pagnol and his fine memoirs describing the rise of a poor but gifted youngster; Beckett, a “great writer,” presumably, with all his existential despair, yet Michel can’t finish any of his works; Sollers, a charming man, but *Une curieuse solitude*, *A Strange Solitude* is boring and *Femmes* not much better (25, 121, 176, 184, 194-95; 21, 100-101, 146, 153, 162). Among the works, there is *Le Club des Cinq*, *The Famous Five*—I enjoy the search for truth— and *Pif* (great moral values) as well as *The Kreutzer Sonata*, its account of jealousy and its arguments for sexual abstinence (32, 34, 67; 25, 28, 57). There are also such magazines as *Mademoiselle Age Tendre* ‘Miss Tender Years’ and its prurient narratives or *Charlie-Hebdo* ‘Charlie Weekly,’ its cult of youth and worship of individual freedom, the Catalogue from 3 Suisses, its sloganeering and lingerie section, the *Dernières Nouvelles du Monoprix* ‘Latest News from the Supermarket,’ the life stories supplied by Christian tracts or by advertising, and the various stories I choose not to develop (e.g. 239; 197). When it comes to thinkers, I like Kant’s ethics but I don’t like Nietzsche’s (35, 46; 28-29, 38); I cannot stand Bernard Defrance’s ass-kissing of the young (191; 159); I have a special fondness for Frédéric Hubczejak: not a great researcher or a profound philosopher

but “un être extraordinairement brillant, pugnace, à la pensée à la fois pragmatique et mobile—le portrait, en définitive, d’un extraordinaire agitateur d’idées” (309-10) ‘an extraordinarily brilliant and pugnacious individual, a pragmatic and agile mind, the archetype of an intellectual propagandist’ (259).

A number of figures deserve much more attention (if only I had time!): Proust, for example, so many of whose patient descriptions, fine distinctions, and beautiful statements have no relation to contemporary society and certainly make no sense to the apes in our schools (192-93; 160-61); Kafka, whose universe marked by shame and utter loneliness corresponds, on the contrary, not only to Bruno’s world but to our own (60-61; 52); Baudelaire, too, who so memorably conveys much of what concerns me: “Langoisse, la mort, la honte, l’ivresse, la nostalgie, l’enfance perdue ... rien que des sujets indiscutables, des thèmes solides” (193) ‘Here were real themes: death, anguish, shame, dissipation, lost childhood and nostalgia—transcendent subjects’ (161). Obviously, the presence of Auguste Comte, whose work signals the end of metaphysics, is pervasive (see Sartori); and so is that of Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*, *Brave New World Revisited*, *Island*). His writing is clumsy, I know, and his characters lifeless. But what amazing predictive powers! Moreover, “le premier parmi les écrivains, y compris, parmi les écrivains de science-fiction, il a compris qu’après la physique c’était maintenant la biologie qui allait jouer un rôle moteur” (157-58) ‘[he] was the first writer to realize that biology would take over from physics as the driving force of society—long before other sci-fi writers’ (131). Too bad he became “une caution théorique majeure de l’expérience hippie” (159) ‘a pillar of the hippie experiment’ (132). Aren’t the serial killers of the 1990s children of the 1960s hippies (211-12; 174-75)? Finally, I must mention the Book of Kells because I believe that, in a fundamental sense, it is very much like me. Looked at quickly, it can seem to lack any subtlety; but studied patiently, it yields marvelous complexities, tightly linked intricacies, and proves to be all subtlety (300-02; 250-51). I can only hope that, forgetting all the media hype and dropping any ideological blinders, ever more readers will examine me ever more carefully and discover all the riches I contain.

Notes

- 1 All translations are mine except for translations from Houellebecq, *Particules élémentaires*, which come from Houellebecq, *Elementary Particles*.
- 2 See, in particular, Clément, Clément and Wesemael, Demonpion, Noguez, Wesemael. See also Houellebecq, *Interventions*; Houellebecq, *Interventions 2*; and Houellebecq and Lévy.
- 3 I know: Michel Tournier's *Le Roi des Aulnes*, *The Erl King*. But it is really not the same.
- 4 At times, it all got so complicated that I lost control (e.g. 116; 96).

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