

Michel Houellebecq—*Interventions 2020*

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Physics vs metaphysics, Lamartine's *Graziella*, Joris-Karl Huysmans *Against Nature*, Emmanuel Carrere *The Kingdom*

“And Prevert’s ‘textual work’ remains embryonic: he writes with clarity and a real naturalness, sometimes even with emotion; he’s not interested in writing as such, not in the impossibility of writing; his main source of inspiration, it seems, is life. So on the whole he hasn’t provided fodder for post graduate theses.”

“Contemporary architecture is all about creating neutral spaces where the information and advertising messages generated by social functioning can be freely deplored, messages that in fact *constitute* that very functioning.”

“Mobile, open to transformation, always available, modern employees are undergoing a similar process of depersonalization. The techniques that teach adaptability, popularized by ‘New Age’ workshops, aim to create indefinitely mutable individuals, free from any intellectual or emotional rigidity. Freed from the shackles of belonging, loyalty, and rigid codes of behavior, the modern individual is thus ready to take his place in a system of generalized transactions within which he or she can univocally and unambiguously be given an exchange value.”

“It took several decades to completely filter out the symbolic meanings added onto the different professions, whether these meanings were laudatory (church, education) or deprecatory (advertising, prostitution).”

“In everyday conversation, it’s exactly as if the direct expression of a feeling, and emotion, or an idea had become impossible because it’s too vulgar. Everything has to pass through the distorting filter of humor, a humor that of course ends up being empty and turning into tragic silence.”

“There are sixty pages in this style. I admit that I wasn’t expecting this. For the first time in my life, I begin to feel a vague sympathy for American feminists.”

“After his spouse’s death, a retiree finds himself somewhat in the same situation as a child: he travels in groups, he has to make friends.”

“Adolescence in our contemporary societies is not a secondary, transient state; on the contrary, it’s the state in which, as we gradually age in our physical being, we are today condemned to live, practically until the day we die.”

“For my part, I have always considered feminists to be amiable dimwits, harmless in principle, but unfortunately made dangerous by their disarming lack of lucidity. So, in the 1970s you could see them fighting for contraception, abortion, sexual freedom, etc., just as if the ‘patriarchal system’ was an invention of wicked males, when the historical aim of men had obviously been to f*** as many girls as possible without having to face the burden of a family. The poor ladies were even naïve enough to imagine that lesbian love, an erotic condiment enjoyed by almost all active heterosexuals, was a dangerous challenge to male power. Finally, they displayed—and this was the saddest thing about it—an incomprehensible appetite for the professional world and for business life; men, who had long known what to expect when it came to the ‘freedom’ and ‘fulfilment’ offered by work, chuckled softly.”

“In New York as in Rome, despite the apparent dynamism, one feels a curious atmosphere of decrepitude, death, the end of the world.”

“Unlike most people I don’t fear death, as I get older I rediscover my long-forgotten youth, and once in a while, when the going gets tough, I bury myself comfortably in my work. My books already guarantee me a form of immortality.”

“I hadn’t understood that respect for identities had grown so strong. Respect has become obligatory, even for the most immoral and foolish cultures.”

“Like Dostoevsky, I believe that everyone who promotes generous and general ideas should be asked to make one particular person happy.”

“You can’t start life all over again. Only the Americans think you can.”

“If I’m politically correct, what will I gain from it? They don’t even promise me seventy-two virgins. They just promise they’ll keep pissing me off, they promise I’ll be able to buy Ralph Lauren polo shirts... That’s why I think the only substance of the project is a desire to disappear.”

“Literature is useless. If it had any use, the leftist scum who monopolized intellectual debate throughout the twentieth century couldn’t even have existed.”

“In terms of literature and thought, on the other hand, the collapse is almost unbelievable, especially since 1945, and the results appalling: you only need to remember the crass scientific ignorance of a Satre and a Beauvoir, who were supposedly working within the field of philosophy, or the almost incredible fact that Malraux could—even if only very briefly—be considered a ‘great writer’, you can gauge the degree of stupidity to which the notion of political commitment will have led us, and you are astonished that anyone can, even today, take an intellectual seriously.”

“We need also simply note the persistent popularity of the theories of the ‘social contract’, based on the fiction of free individuals pre-existing the community and on the notion of ‘human rights’, independent of any duty that follows from it.”

“The word ‘nihilist’ has a precise and limited historical meaning that dates from the Russian nineteenth century: nihilists were revolutionaries who said to themselves ‘we don’t know that we want to set up afterwards, but we must destroy everything, it’s always going to be better than it was before’. But I’m no nihilist, quite the contrary, I’m a conservative, like Benoit Duteurtre.”

“Michel, the character in *Elementary Particles*, thinks a lot about his field of activity, but not about his life. He doesn’t see himself as a core of will pursuing goals, making decisions, directing his life. If my characters had to be divided into categories, on the one hand there’d be those who have an interest in life outside of their own lives, an intellectual interest, as with Michel or Jed in *The Map And The Territory*, which allow them not to live very much without this being much of a problem for them. On the other hand, there’d be those who have no interest in their lives, outside of life itself, and behave more erratically, such as Bruno or the narrator of *Platform*.”

“The fact that science has become exactly positivist, that there is no metaphysical entity behind the laws of science, in reality reopens the possibility of a religious foundation.”

“Good exists, it absolutely exists, just as much as evil. And it’s this existence, absolutely contrary to all natural law, this *counterproductive* existence from the biological viewpoint, that’s really the problem. And it’s this *problem of goodness*, perhaps the only problem of any value, that Emmanuel Carrere poses in the most beautiful pages of these books.”

“I’m not a historian and don’t know ancient history; for example, I can’t say whether it’s Kennedy or Johnson who is most to blame in the sordid Vietnamese affair; but I have the impression that it has been a long time since the United States of America won a war, and that it’s military interventions (overt or secret) abroad have been, for at least fifty years, nothing but a succession of ignominious episodes crowned by fiascos.”

“I don’t believe that Russia has any role as a universal guide, my admiration for Dostoevsky doesn’t go so far; but I admire the resistance of Orthodoxy on its lands, I believe that Catholicism would do well to draw inspiration from it, that ‘ecumenical dialogue’ could usefully be limited to a dialogue with the Orthodox, and that the schism of 1054 was, for the Christian world, the beginning of the end (but I believe, on the other hand, that the end is never certain, not until it has actually happened.”

“One sometimes gets the impressions, when reading it, that this renewal [of evangelical Christianity in the Bible Belt], can only concern people who’ve been alcoholics, drug addicts, prostitutes, or homeless; it’s in no way intended for people who are normally integrated into society, having spent their childhood in a reasonably loving family.”

“This attempt to catch up with modernity is a glaring failure; the churches have emptied rapidly. Before Vatican II, a third of French people said they went to mass every Sunday. In 2012, this figure had fallen to six percent, a major cultural shift. No doubt the phenomena are related: the Church tried to conform to the world just as the world was getting uglier. This is a sufficiently serious ground for rebuke: we are entitled to expect the Church to indicate a path regardless of the upheavals of the time, to stay itself. It should point out a path, the path for God, for example. Latin was supposed to mark a difference between the language of everyday life and the language in which we address the creator. Incense rising up into the nave pointed a path for the soul to follow. The priest, with his back to the faithful, was in reality turned towards heaven. The sacred was quietly driven out of the churches, and replaced by something ‘cool’ and festive... You have to be in the world, but not of the world, Jesus told his disciples. The Church should have taken Him more seriously.”

“In general, to feel nostalgic about the period of controversies between great thinkers on the subject of faith seems anachronistic to me. The Church itself has given up, at the same time as it withdrew from the public sphere, any attempt to play a role and to influence people’s minds.”

“At mass, in the universal prayer, we have a kindly word for Protestants and Orthodox, we hope to find ‘unity’. John Paul II invited all the religions to Assisi and gave them equal legitimacy—later on, he would ask forgiveness on behalf of the Church for its faults against other religions. This dialogue ends up resembling our parodies of contemporary debates, which Phillippe Muray mocked in these terms: ‘We debate before asking ourselves what we’re debating about: the important thing is to come together.’ People do not seek the truth, but consensus; this leads to confusion, which results in a form of chancy syncretism, relativism, and even in the submission of the church... It’s as if Catholics were the only ones to apologize for having the truth. For a non-believer, this attitude isn’t very reassuring. However, if we confine ourselves to Christians alone, and if we trust Engels, according to whom ‘after a certain number, quantity becomes quality’, there are 1.2 billion Catholics, 900 million Protestants, and 285 million Orthodox, which constitutes a favorable balance of power and a more advantageous start to negotiations than that considered in Assisi.”

“It all consists of the way the Catholic Church has, throughout its history, given too much importance to reason... Man is a being of reason—if you will; it happens, from time to time. But he is above all a being of flesh, and of emotion: it would be a good idea not to forget this.”

“The main result of the coronavirus, on the other hand, should be to accelerate certain ongoing mutations. For quite a few years, all technological developments, whether minor (video on demand, contactless payment) or

major (teleworking, internet shopping, social networks) have mainly had the consequence (or the main objective?) of decreasing material contacts, and especially human contacts.”

“Sparta prided itself on efficiency ‘and, for this reason, disappeared without a trace.’ Our society, too, likes to boast of its efficiency; it will disappear, like Sparta, and maybe all that will remain is the uncertain memory of a shame, the shadow of a certain disgust.”