

*The Guardian* (London) - Final Edition  
29 October 2005  
Section: Guardian Review Pages (937) 16

*The Possibility of an Island* by Michel Houellebecq  
London : Weidenfeld & Nicholson  
ISBN: 0297850989

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Headline: A dog's life (poodles excepted): Michel Houellebecq's misanthropy is all too evident in 'The Possibility of an Island ' says Michael Worton:

Houellebecq is a controversial writer, and his latest novel is certain to increase the controversy around him. For his many admirers, he is a daring, prophetic figure who anatomises with honesty life in the contemporary west and exposes the lot of the millions of mediocre, grafting individuals whose role in our financial and emotional economies is usually ignored.

In his second novel, *Atomised* (2000), he tilted ferociously, and often creatively, against such targets as the decline of religion, consumerism, sexual freedom and "free love", the liberalist tradition of the west and, with an abiding obsession, the nature of love. In *Platform* (2003), he chose sex tourism, renewing his attack on western decadence and managing also to alienate the worldwide Islamic community with some gratuitously offensive comments about the supposed stupidity of Islam, which led to him being prosecuted (unsuccessfully) for inciting racial hatred.

While I disagree profoundly with his position that all the major monotheistic religions are based on "texts of hate", he provides so little evidence to support his view that it is not worth engaging with him on the subject. The problem with *Platform* for me is neither the allegedly anti-Islamic remarks nor its tawdry subject-matter; it is the fact that the novel is weakly conceived, badly structured and in narrative terms simply not convincing.

In *The Possibility of an Island* he once again addresses big ideas, but without giving them big thought or attention. This time the main subjects are mankind's desire for immortality, as made possible by cloning, and, again, human love. Written in the first person, the novel tells the story of Daniel, a stand-up comic whose career is built on "the commercial exploitation of bad instincts" such as racism, paedophilia and torture. Like all Houellebecq's anti-heroes, he is a misanthropist, loathing both his public and mankind in general and making a fetish of his own honesty.

Daniel's chapters are interspersed with those of two of his cloned descendants living 1,000 years later, Daniel24 and Daniel25, both of whom seem warmer and more human than their originator - even though, as neohumans, they are said to "go through life without joy and without mystery", living on sunlight, water and mineral salts and having only occasional, virtual contact with other neohumans.

Daniel's life is one of unrelenting disappointment with life and rage against other people, including his two lovers, the sophisticated magazine editor Isabelle, who

doesn't like sex, and the sensual budding actress Esther, who doesn't like love. He finally discovers a sect, the Elohimites, whom he initially finds attractive because of their cult of promiscuity and, later, because they give him, through cloning, the possibility of eternal life after his suicide - although why anyone so miserable would want to live for ever defeats me. The Elohimites are based on the Raelians, a sect in whom Houellebecq became interested when living in Spain and who believe that the ancient Hebrew concept of Elohim should not be translated as "God" in the singular, but as "those who came from the sky", flying in from another planet to create life on earth. They infamously hit the headlines in December 2002, when Brigitte Boisselier, a Raelian bishop and biochemist, claimed that they had created the first successful human clone.

There is a strong autobiographical dimension to the novel. Daniel has a son he doesn't see and in whom he isn't interested, just as Houellebecq for a long time showed no interest in his son. Predictably, his favourite philosopher is the pessimist Schopenhauer, who believed that people could not have individual wills but were part of one vast universe-embracing but evil will, which is the source of all endless suffering. And, of course, Schopenhauer was a lonely, angry, friendless man, who found his only solace in his poodle - just like Daniel and his creator. This is one of the problems with reading Houellebecq: he seems incapable of creating characters who are more than ventriloquist's dummies for him.

The real flaw at the centre of this novel is that Houellebecq can't think or talk interestingly about love, the novel's main concern. We are treated to a series of Scrooge-ish maxims, such as "Living together alone is hell between consenting adults". Dogs are "machines for loving", but the novel articulates a stunted and confused view of love, where love between a man and a woman is equated with love for a pet.

Houellebecq's style is one of scattergun misanthropy: he often gets bored with his own rants, and targets are abandoned without resolution as Daniel and his successor clones move on to new howls of contempt. The best way to read *Possibility* is quickly, without pondering its cod philosophy and portentous metaphysical pronouncements, which take the anatomisation of banality to a paroxysm of the baroque. There is little point in thinking about what Houellebecq says or following up his references, since their irrelevance is the point.

Houellebecq is at bottom a sentimentalist who lacks the honesty to recognise that fact. And his novels, especially this one, can seem like therapy sessions, with the reader cast in the role of the therapist, condemned to listen silently to a torrent of platitudes and prejudices.

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