

The Art of Struggle



MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ

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HERLA

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Translators' Foreword

I

Michel Houellebecq is well known and in fact notorious as a novelist in the English-speaking world. In spite of his three books of poetry, few readers are aware of him as a poet. In reality, it is as a poet that Houellebecq started his career and began to make his name in Parisian literary circles. After publishing his poetry manifesto *Rester Vivant* in 1991 (*Staying Alive*), Houellebecq went on to publish his first collection of poems, *La Poursuite du bonheur*, in 1992 (*The Pursuit of Happiness*). *The Art of Struggle*, originally entitled *Le Sens du combat*, was published in 1996 after his first successes as a novelist. It went on to be the first collection of poems to win the Prix de Flore. In 1999, by now established as a novelist – thanks to *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (*Whatever*), in 1994, and *Les Particules élémentaires* (*Atomised*) in 1998 – Michel Houellebecq published *Renaissance, Re-Birth*, his third and last book of poetry to date.

At the time of the release of Houellebecq's first books of poems and novels, an intense web of debate had developed around sexuality and emotion based on the ideals of freedom inherited from the 1960s. Mixed with the rising impetus of free-market globalization, the texture of the language used in this debate was almost featureless. Its aim was to universalise human affect into a set of communicable and easily manageable psychological truths. It set out to influence the most intimate aspect of our lives. Self-help books and commercial psychoanalysis became the first port of call when things did not feel right, and there was a sense that perhaps a more gentle and politically correct form of consumerism could cure the ills of consumerism itself. In the midst of such a

culture came Houellebecq, a depressed, nonchalant figure whose very way of smoking cigarettes – holding them between his middle and ring finger – seemed to signal his dissent from the world.

An animosity began to grow against Houellebecq in the media, and one of the reasons was that Houellebecq had an opposing vision of contemporary modernity from the prevalent talk of “diversity” and “multiculturalism”. As the title of his novel *Platform* (published originally as *Plateforme* in 2001) encapsulates, the content of all his novels suggests that the feel of the world is becoming more and more homogenous. The world has been standardized rather than enriched by the growing network of media communication. This idea of homogeneity translates for Houellebecq into the most intimate aspects of our sense of self. As he put it in an interview with the novelist and critic Philippe Sollers, his works convey the intuition that “today, we can no longer experience desire independently from advertising”. Generally, as his eponymous character in *Platform* suggests, Michel Houellebecq has a strong “inkling that more and more, the whole world would come to resemble an airport”.

Like Baudelaire, his greatest poetic influence, Houellebecq is the aesthetic ambassador of his own modernity. His attitude to life has trickled into a singular way of writing. Like his own demeanour, Houellebecq’s poetry exacerbates rather than reconciles the discrepancies between the projection of happiness constructed by consumer society and his personal and contemplative experience of it. During his appearances on French television at the time of the release in the Nineties of his first two novels, Houellebecq gave a fascinating depiction of someone who had not so much overcome as mastered the ills of his own depression, to the extent that depression had itself become an art. As a poet Houellebecq noticeably shapes his emotional nonconformity into a critique of the world which has made him, and he makes his social inadequacies into his choice of weapon. In French, “sens” can mean either “way” or “sense”, and “combat” can mean “struggle” or “fight”. *Le Sens*

du combat conveys Houellebecq's will to carve out and sculpt a place for collective feelings of discontent within a consumer-driven, universalizing appropriation of affect.

As many of his critics have observed, Houellebecq unashamedly projects his own dejection into his works. The same could be said of *The Art of Struggle*. But in return for these intense, dismal bouts of subjectivism, Houellebecq manages to seize, internalize and depict human beings' emotional relationship with the fleeting nature of the global free market. But what is there to be mourned, one might ask, in everything that we gain from the constant renewal of objects and possibilities? Houellebecq's answer is developed from a different premise. What we fail to mourn in our sense of constant growth and expansion is for him the kernel of our discontent. In insisting on his own sense of loss in a world of abundance, Houellebecq shows that no authentic form of renewal or regeneration can occur without formulating and accepting the value of what is left behind. The invariable celebration characteristic of consumerism changes our capacity to experience loss into a form of melancholia arising from our failure to mourn. At their best, the poems of *The Art of Struggle* are able to express these unprocessed feelings with simple and moving irony:

I'll go home with my lungs
The tiles will be freezing.
As a child I loved sweets
And now nothing matters.

There is a sense in *The Art of Struggle* that the most direct way of incarnating these feelings of unmourned loss is in lyrical form. By giving a recognizable form to loss, Houellebecq's lyricism opens the invisible and often disowned side of our consumerism to criticism and change. Houellebecq's poems are thus not a window onto his own internal doom. They shape his darkest intuitions into light, illuminating and clarifying in the process some of the



La Tour Gan, now called La Tour First, in La Défense, Paris

The Art of Struggle

Le jour monte et grandit, retombe sur la ville
Nous avons traversé la nuit sans délivrance
J'entends les autobus et la rumeur subtile
Des échanges sociaux. J'accède à la présence.

Aujourd'hui aura lieu. La surface invisible
Délimitant dans l'air nos êtres de souffrance
Se forme et se durcit à une vitesse terrible ;
Le corps, le corps pourtant, est une appartenance.

Nous avons traversé fatigues et désirs
Sans retrouver le goût des rêves de l'enfance
Il n'y a plus grand-chose au fond de nos sourires,
Nous sommes prisonniers de notre transparence.

Dawn rises, grows, settles on the city
We've come through the night and not been set free
I hear the buses and the quiet hum
Of social exchange. I'm overcome with presence.

Today will happen. Invisible surfaces
Separate our suffering selves in the air
Then form and harden at a terrible pace;
But the body, still our pact with the body.

We've come through strain and desire
Childhood and dreams still pass us by
Not much there in a lifetime of smiling
We're prisoners in our own clear selves.

Au long de ces journées où le corps nous domine
Où le monde est bien là, comme un bloc de ciment,
Ces journées sans plaisir, sans passion, sans tourment,
Dans l'inutilité pratiquement divines

Au milieu des herbages et des forêts de hêtres,
Au milieu des immeubles et des publicités
Nous vivons un moment d'absolue vérité :
Oui le monde est bien là, et tel qu'il paraît être.

Les êtres humains sont faits de parties séparables,
Leur corps coalescent n'est pas fait pour durer
Seuls dans leurs alvéoles soigneusement murés
Ils attendent l'envol, l'appel de l'impalpable.

Le gardien vient toujours au cœur du crépuscule ;
Son regard est pensif, il a toutes les clés,
Les cendres des captifs sont très vite envolées ;
Il faut quelques minutes pour laver la cellule.

Throughout those days when the body rules
When the world is like a block, so very there
Those joyless days, no passion, no torment
In their blankness so nearly divine,

In the midst of the clearings and forests
In the midst of the towers and the ads
Comes a moment of true understanding:
Oh yes, the world is there, just as it seems.

Human beings come in separate parts,
Congealing bodies are not built to last,
In their meticulous pods tidily sealed
They wait for take-off, the call of the untouched.

The guard always comes in the middle of sunset,
He looks like he's thinking, and he's got all the keys,
The ashes of the inmates will quickly be gone,
It takes a few minutes to clean out the cell.

APRÈS-MIDI

Les gestes ébauchés se terminent en souffrance
Et au bout de cent pas on aimerait rentrer
Pour se vautrer dans son mal d'être et se coucher,
Car le corps de douleur fait peser sa présence.

Dehors il fait très chaud et le ciel est splendide,
La vie fait tournoyer le corps des jeunes gens
Que la nature appelle aux fêtes du printemps
Vous êtes seul, hanté par l'image du vide,

Et vous sentez peser votre chair solitaire
Et vous ne croyez plus à la vie sur la Terre
Votre cœur fatigué palpite avec effort

Pour repousser le sang dans vos membres trop lourds,
Vous avez oublié comment on fait l'amour,
La nuit tombe sur vous comme un arrêt de mort.

MID-AFTERNOON

Gestures half-form, then end up in suffering
After walking a bit you'd rather go home
To sprawl in depression and lie on your bed,
Your body of sorrow's heavy with presence.

Outside it's hot and the sky is magnificent,
Life puts the bodies of the young in a spin
And nature calls them to the rite of spring
You're alone, haunted by the image of nothing

And you feel the weight of flesh, and loneliness
And you don't believe in life on this earth
Your worn-out heart flutters and struggles

And makes your limbs go heavy with blood,
You've forgotten how people make love,
Night falls like a sentence of death.

CHÔMAGE

Je traverse la ville dont je n'attends plus rien
Au milieu d'êtres humains toujours renouvelés
Je le connais par cœur, ce métro aérien ;
Il s'écoule des jours sans que je puisse parler.

Oh ! ces après-midi, revenant du chômage
Repensant au loyer, méditation morose,
On a beau ne pas vivre, on prend quand même de l'âge
Et rien ne change à rien, ni l'été, ni les choses.

Au bout de quelques mois, on passe en fin de droits
Et l'automne revient, lent comme une gangrène ;
L'argent devient la seule idée, la seule loi,
On est vraiment tout seul. Et on traîne, et on traîne...

Les autres continuent leur danse existentielle,
Vous êtes protégé par un mur transparent ;
L'hiver est revenu. Leur vie semble réelle.
Peut-être, quelque part, l'avenir vous attend.

THE DOLE

I cross the city with nothing in mind
And the endless turnover of souls,
The overhead line, I know it by heart;
Days go by, I've nothing to say.

Oh, those afternoons coming back from the social
Thinking about rent and other morose doings,
Vegetate as much as you like, you're still getting older,
It doesn't change anything, neither summer, nor things.

A few months later you lose your benefits
Autumn comes back slowly like gangrene;
Money is the only thought, the only law,
You are really alone, and it lingers and insists.

The others go on in their existential ballet,
Behind the glass partitions you're sheltered away;
Winter is back. Their lives seem real.
Maybe, somewhere, your future is waiting.

Les moments immobiles que l'on vit presque en fraude
Et les petites morts, petits autodafés ;
C'était sur les deux heures et la ville était chaude,
Les bustiers fourmillaient aux terrasses des cafés

Et tout s'organisait pour la reproduction :
Comportements humains, jeux de dents, rires forcés
L'impossibilité permanente de l'action
Morceaux de vie qu'on rêve, bientôt désamorçés.

Les humains s'agitaient dans les murs de la ville :
Flots sur le boulevard, téléphones portatifs ;
Inquiétude sur la ligne, jeux de regards hostiles :
Tout fonctionne, tout tourne, et j'ai les nerfs à vif.

Sometimes we live in a fraudulent stillness
With little faints and little tortures
The cafés were swarming with cleavage,
Two o'clock and the city was hot

Everything was set for reproduction:
All teeth, behaviour and smiles
Everything made endlessly impossible
Fragments of a dream, soon unprimed.

Humans were busy in the walls of their city:
Crowds on the streets and mobile phones;
Anxiety all the way, hostility and looks:
Everything runs smooth, my nerves are raw.