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Carole Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. Xx + 215 pp. \$27.99 (cl). ISBN 978-0-8264-2262-0.

Review by Gavin Bowd, University of St Andrews.

*Le phénomène Houellebecq* has led to the emergence of a cottage industry of criticism, in academia but also in the wider media, a sign of the disturbing eclecticism of this *enfant terrible's* work. Much has been made of the *affaires* surrounding Houellebecq's provocative stances on Islam, sex tourism, feminism, abortion and, lately, the political future of France. Many critics, especially in the "Anglo-Saxon" world, have paid close, often indignant, attention to abjection and objectification in the world of Houellebecq.

Carole Sweeney's monograph deals with these now familiar issues, but refreshingly places them in the political and economic context of what New Left critics like Fredric Jameson have called late capitalism. Houellebecq comes across as a troubling figure for troubled times: an excoriating critic of commodification and its invasion of the most intimate corners of our social being, as well as a best-selling commodity in his own right, the object of highly-lucrative publishing "transfers" and the inevitable object of scorn from more "authentic"—and less wealthy—intellectuals. Situating him on the political spectrum has become extremely tricky in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the hubristic neo-liberal declaration of the "end of History" and the virulence of contemporary Islamism. Sweeney suggests that Houellebecq is *rouge-brun* (or left conservative), combining a critique of neo-liberalism with a desire to "liquidate the sixties" (chapter four). On the formal level, Houellebecq's writing pursues this blurring of distinctions: his hybrid style undermines distinctions between "high" and "low" culture, mixing philosophy, pornography, poetry and pop culture. Given this, combined with the trappings of fame—as a writer but also, most recently, as an unlikely movie star—it is therefore not surprising that French academics have been slow to dignify Houellebecq's work with their critical gazes, and, even now, they remain a rare and embattled breed.

Houellebecq can be described as the Karl Marx of the lonely, but, Sweeney argues, there is none of the emancipatory optimism and chiliastic certainty found at the end of the *Communist Manifesto*. Instead, in Houellebecq's novels, the "extension of the domain of the struggle" (chapter two) leads to an emptying of affect, a heap of ruins populated by abject, sexually-desperate figures who do not even merit the term character. This emptiness finds form in a "blank" prose that invites comparison to Bret Easton Ellis, whom Houellebecq admires. In a world where, echoing Ellis's *American Psycho*, "mergers and acquisitions" accompany "murders and executions," History leads inexorably to an apocalyptic conclusion which evacuates definitively the human race.

Sweeney's monograph is the best in English so far (the work of French scholar Bruno Viard remains the most acute critique of Houellebecq's peculiar "new reactionary" politics). Her close textual analyses are perceptive, well-written and sometimes even funny. However, the book (inevitably) has its limits. As with so many other critiques, very little attention is given to Houellebecq's poetry, which he repeatedly declares to be at the heart of his oeuvre. This poetry certainly has its dark, despairing side, but it is equally full of affect and lyricism. Poetry is also considered by this Baudelaire of the hypermarket to promise a form of *révolution froide* that can at least resist the rampant "becoming" of *le système libéral*.

Given Houellebecq's status as the best contemporary French poet—with the possible exception of Jean Ristat, who launched *le phénomène's* career but receives no mention in this book—it is also erroneous to argue that he gives little attention to “form” in his novels. *The Possibility of an Island* strikes not only because of its complex layering of styles, but also its changing rhythms, while, in *The Map and the Territory*, Houellebecq's “autofictional” *mise à mort* of his abject self, as well as his deconstruction of the genre of the police procedural, are a formal *tour de force*. It is also highly questionable that characterisation and affect do indeed dissolve in the Houellebecquian world: *Atomised's* Bruno Clément must surely be one of the most memorable (and strangely attractive) characters in recent French fiction, while love affairs, however doomed, remain central to the intrigues, not to mention the haunting presence of the father and a deep attachment to the canine, if not human, race.

Finally, it would be interesting to see how Carole Sweeney applies her thesis to *The Map and the Territory*, which gets only cursory mention, understandably given its recent publication. Granted, *The Map* ends with the “total triumph” of vegetation over the ephemeral products of human industry, but there is still a trace of utopian impulse in Jed Martin's art as well as his father's architecture, while both they and the real/fictional Houellebecq are attracted to the work of William Morris, whose combination of Marxism and a passion for beauty suggest there could still be hope in this neo-liberal world.

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