

'The Disappearance of the Western Libido': Review of Michel Houellebecq's Serotonin



Author: **Jed Lea-Henry**

Michel Houellebecq is an unpleasant visit from an old friend, banging too loudly too late at night. He hasn't phoned ahead, doesn't take off his shoes, pushes his way inside, wakes your sleeping children, makes sexual advances towards your wife, collapses into your favourite chair, and demands that you breakout the alcohol...and not the cheap stuff.

Shaken from your comfort, your routine, and your lazy night in front of the TV, the unpleasantness is also exactly what you have been needing. The old painful stories come fast, and his memory is better than yours. He reminds you that there is a person – someone he intimately recognises – underneath it all. He reminds you of something long forgotten – how bad it can get for some people out there... how bad it has been for you.

Houellebecq always writes to a theme, as if himself addicted. And Serotonin – his latest book – embraces this addiction as closely as any other: a “*small, white, scored oval tablet*”, a “*perfect drug, a simple, hard drug that brings no joy, defined entirely by a lack, and by the cessation of that lack*”. And chasing old dragons, it starts with life at an early end; and with sex.

Florent-Claude Labrouste is a mildly successful agricultural bureaucrat in a wildly affluent world. His unglamorous work flushes his lifestyle and his savings each month, enough to support a much younger girlfriend for whom he has an uneven contempt. He hates Paris but he lives there, he hates his name but won't change it, and now in his late forties, with his parents both dead in a carefully planned suicide pact, he is alone, uninvolved, confused by it all, but not particularly saddened.

In a sign of just how poorly tuned he is, Florent-Claude does a little research, and discovers to his shock that “*in France, abandoning your family is not a crime*”. This is all he needs to nonchalantly cut himself loose into the world once more, with a pocket full of anti-depressants:

“My planned deliberate disappearance had been a complete success, and now there I was, a middle aged Western man, sheltered from need for several years, with no relatives or friends, stripped of personal plans and of genuine interests, deeply disappointed by his previous life, whose emotional experiences had been variable but had had the common feature of coming to an end, essentially deprived of reasons to live and or reasons to die.”

It all feels very cavalier, like an inmate escaping over a prison wall only because he wants to try something new, and only because it is easy; not because the freedom outside is alluring in any way. And if you don't look very hard Serotonin can do this to you, as Florent-Claude stumbles through life defining choices with the same matter-of-fact numbness that he opens the fridge door each morning.

It is easy to sense Michel Houellebecq getting angrier and angrier with each book – not through his characters, but with his readers and with his reviewers. By definition clichés stick, and the label of ‘nihilism’ has become the dismissive stain that passers-by smear across his writing, and then walk away through the crowd, confident and reassured by all the smiles and nodding faces.

This is all wrong! Books like *Serotonin* stare into the darkness, but there is never an embrace; they are not happy tragedies, just tragedies in themselves. And they are obvious mirrors of their author, who drinks too much, battles depression, thinks constantly about suicide, obsesses over sex, and dislikes so much of what he sees changing around him.

Between *Submission* (his previous book) and *Serotonin*, Houellebecq returned to live in his native France, and so the setting for his new novel is also, once again, France. He also got married... for the third time. His new wife is of Chinese heritage, and just like that the permeating, casual racism shifts to a new target. The old favourite – “*Arabs*” – still get a mention or two, but now it is mostly all Asian, orientalist, and just distant enough to give some cover for his new source of writing inspiration.

The live-in girlfriend that Florent-Claude dislikes so much, and whom he abandons in the night, is Yuzu, his “*Japanese companion*”. She only ever watches Japanese TV, is always distracted by her phone, ghosts her way unseen around his house, spends his income, and gives Florent-Claude the impression that she is using him as an excuse to avoid returning home, where a long-overdue marriage into one of Kyoto’s elite families awaits her.

The lightness of it all is played up – “*it was then that I realised I would forget Yuzu very quickly*” Florent-Claude thinks aloud as he walks out of the relationship – but the social dislocation feels real, as does the cultural gap between them. The growing awareness that two people from such different backgrounds, for all they have in common, will always have more pulling them apart than holding them together – a lifelong battle that few people survive.

There is so much of Houellebecq in his writing that it makes the reader shift uncomfortably in their seat, nervous to turn another page, as if peering through his diary. You have his permission, but it still doesn’t feel appropriate.

And like a teenage girl with a crush, everywhere you look he is passionately hung-up on small details. Cars are never just cars, they are a “*4x4 Mercedes G350 TD*”, a “*Volkswagen Beetle*”, or a “*diesel 4x4*”. Computers are never just computers, with the reader carefully lectured on the dimensions of the “*MacBook Air*”, what it is made of, and how much it weighs. And new to Houellebecq’s fascination, now guns are also not just guns, they are a “*357 Magnum*”, a “*short-barrelled Smith & Western*”, and a “*Steyr Mannlicher HS50*”, all described down to their minutia.

Watching themes repeat like this across his novels, you can easily see the strange human author behind it – someone enchanted by brochures, travel guides, and “*roadside assistance organisations*”. And yet still, somehow, people find a way not to take him seriously.

In Houellebecq’s obviously finest piece of literature and prose, *The Map and the Territory*, he inserts himself as a significant character, and talks of being unable to write for weeks due to adolescent laziness, while wallowing in front of the TV watching modern cartoons. This was almost immediately laughed off as an overdone attempt at humour and self-mockery. Literary geniuses of his kind shouldn’t suffer in this way! Yet based on everything we otherwise know about Houellebecq, this is almost certainly pure autobiography.

He is dismissed as a nihilist in exactly the same way. It is an easy label and an easy truth. But the very thought of everything being meaningless is an insult to what Houellebecq creates, and to what Serotonin is. By its own definition, nihilism is not this targeted, this clear-eyed, this peculiar, nor this angry – it can't be without becoming something else entirely... Michel Houellebecq *is* something else entirely.

It is also in the early moments of this novel that Houellebecq is in his sexual pomp. Everywhere that Florent-Claude looks he sees it, and contrasts it to the impotence that his new anti-depressants have caused in him. When he finds footage of Yuzu at a *"canine mini gang bang"*, he feels *"disgusted"* ... but only *"on behalf of the dogs"*. He watches retirees *"finishing their lives peacefully"*, walking from *"bar to beach, beach to bar"* cheerful despite their *"drooping buttocks, their redundant breasts and their inactive cocks"*.

Sex burrows its way into everything, in wonderfully overbearing and graphic ways. Seeking help for his depression, Florent-Claude's doctor prescribes that he try out the *"prostitutes in Thailand"*, they are, after all, *"almost therapeutic"*. And later when he finds an old school friend wallowing alone after his wife has run off with a new man – and their kids in tow – he instinctively recommends that he *"take a Moldovan girl"* as a cure-all; *"they'll wake you up with a blow-job"* having already done *"the milking"* of the cows, *"and breakfast will be ready as well"*.

It feels outlandish at times, like a hand being overlaid with impossible sexual expectations, but after eight novels – none of which deviate from this script – it is clear that Houellebecq thinks that he is onto something. And who knows, maybe he is, maybe *"with sex everything can be resolved, and without sex nothing can"*.

This is half the vessel of Serotonin, and it would have been enough for the old Michel Houellebecq. But since the success of *Submission* with its social commentary on Islam, he seems to want firmer targets now, harder meaning, something beyond literature. Yet another indication that the nihilist label doesn't apply.

This time it's the European Union, and *"European bureaucracies"* – the world that Florent-Claude helped to create before he abandoned his job along with his girlfriend. It is slightly manufactured, and written in the same inquisitive tone that Houellebecq normally writes about vacations and overseas travel. The nationalities of everyone we meet are always meticulously noted down, and the finer details of their behaviour explained away by this:

"How could a Dutch person be xenophobic? That's an oxymoron: right there: Holland isn't a country, it's a business at best".

Houellebecq is trying to tear down the dream after it has already turned nightmare – trying to redraw the romantic lines of Europe. In this, Florent-Claude fantasises constantly about a *"chestnut-haired girl"* who once playfully flirted with him at a gas station. He mentally fills in her personality – honest, caring, instinctive, passionate, traditional – and thinks of chasing her down and of them finding happiness together. This is played-off against the efficient, mechanical, dull, and yet still numbingly pleasing, Yuzu – the European Union from design to reality.

The grocery store shelves are stocked with *"fourteen different kinds of hummus"* from *"every continent"*, and yet it is all very unsatisfying. It's an idea that dies with age, failing – just as Florent-Claude's relationships do – with the growing gap between love and its interests – *"the desire for a social life fades with maturity"*.

The European dream is constantly shadowed back to the time of the “*French peasantry*”, “*aristocracy*” and of “*Christian Knight[s]*”, the “*Franco era*” and unmistakably the recognition that “*libertinism*” is no longer “*reserved for a composite aristocracy*”. It is now for everyone... to everyone’s harm and dislocation.

At a previous stage in his career, when life was enough in itself, Houellebecq wasn’t so clumsy with his symbolism. Here the reader is being swallowed by what the author is trying to do... and conscious of it. There are more clichés this time around, more laboured turns of phrase, and more noticeable attempts at humour than usual.

The imperfections are everywhere and obvious: he waits too long, repeats too much, hurries forward unexpectedly, words echo sentence-after-sentence, the choices of language are curious, the prose feels absent minded at times and less polished, sentences occasionally run half a page in length, and yet somehow – just as with all his other novels – it fits the mind perfectly.

It’s a puzzling thing to watch. At other times in his life, Houellebecq fancied himself as a poet, a philosopher, and a public intellectual, publishing across the spectrum of non-fiction. In this, he was always desperate, mediocre and unsuccessful. Today he makes up for that rejection by indulgently forcing backyard metaphysics – lessons in “*Plato*”, “*Schopenhauer*”, “*Kant*”, “*Heidegger*”, “*Bataille*”, “*Epicurus*”, “*Stoics*”, “*Cynics*” “*Greek[s]*” – into his novels. It never flows to the natural conclusion that he thinks it does, and at times sounds like the ravings of a lost-in-himself conspiracy theorist. And yet, again, somehow, it all fits into place. Houellebecq is doing something here that is incredibly hard to pin down.

A new crutch is offered this time – God. He is everywhere in the opening pages, only to be forgotten in the most pregnant moments later on. But the whole book has this feel to it – like the first half was written, put aside, and promptly forgotten about; then the second half started a year or so later, without the author bothering to check where he was up to. And yet when it starts up afresh, it starts well...

At about the hundred page mark, the sex fades out and the changing mood of the author can be sensed in the changing prose, changing rhythm, pacing, and the poise of the characters. It’s as if Houellebecq has finally cleared his throat, emptied his purse onto the table, and with all the contrived meaning for his book finally out of the way, he is now *just* writing. It is suddenly more comfortable, more instinctive, and less funny.

After a long stay in a hotel, Florent-Claude heads to Normandy to visit that old school friend of his (abandoned by his wife and kids). The two men haven’t seen each other since university, and “*‘I have nothing to eat...’ were the first words with which Aymeric welcomed me*”. The lives of two friends collapsing in different directions, at different speeds, but under the same weight of life and women:

“In the middle of our own dramas we are reassured by the existence of others that we have been spared”

The pages begin to burn now. All around them the pressures of globalisation are shredding the profitability of honest farming. And instead of taking “*a Moldovan girl*” as Florent-Claude suggests, Aymeric – in a foreshadowing of the Yellow Vest movement – takes to fighting the European Union directly. There is a German birdwatcher who turns out to be an active paedophile – the only real concern that our leading character has for the sexual victim (a ten year old girl) is to hope that “*he*

paid her". And soon a young child, of similar age, is being lined up through the clear scope of the Steyr Mannlicher HS50 – *"never had I breathed so slowly, never had my hands trembled so little"*.

It all ends with a sad, overdone crescendo that can be felt coming long before it hits. And it only hits because Houellebecq unmistakably has an audience beyond those people appreciating his literary style. Authors don't sell as many books as he has without it.

Houellebecq is always a reflection of his readers and their lives. Desperate vacuums of existence, tragedy, and failed expectations; whole societies for whom *"A big swerve had occurred some years before and we had deviated atrociously from our normal destinies"*. Lives that seem to resist all neatness and happiness; and who find human relationships impossible. People collapsing in tandem with the world around them – *"That's how a civilisation dies; without worries, without danger or drama and with very little carnage; a civilisation just dies of weariness, of self-disgust"*.

These are the people that we tend to notice only when they find a little internal peace. When they lie down on an old blanket, find their position, focus on their breathing, empty their minds, become one with their surroundings, be present in the moment, and embrace either their spiritual or murderous side: *"shooting has a lot in common with yoga"*.

There is an automatic, reflexive, broken feel to some of this. Which is only further credit to the mind and the creative powers of Michel Houellebecq. He is clearly doing something extraordinary with Serotonin... and with all his novels. In the not too distant future, when some of the fear and disgust has worn off – and once people finally get a handle on just what he is actually doing here (and why it works so well) – university students will pack lecture halls just to try and share in some of that understanding.

Today he remains, deservedly, controversial – a bully yelling angrily into the timid and fragile faces of modern society. And yet who is to say that a little blunt, Houellebecqian conversation, isn't exactly what we are all needing. Something to help counter the harm and the horror out there, awaiting us all:

"The Aymeric I had known: a nice guy, nice to the core and even good; he had simply wanted to be happy and had devoted himself to a rustic dream of durable, high-value production, and to Cecile, but Cecile had turned out to be a fat slut excited by life in London with a high-society pianist; and the European Union had also been a fat slut".