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**“AN OUTSIDER’S VIEW OF MODERN
IRELAND:
MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ’S *ATOMISED*.”**

Eamon Maher

People may be surprised to see an article on Houellebecq’s IMPAC-winning novel, *Atomised*, the vast majority of which is set in France, appearing in an issue of *Studies* dealing with the theme of modernisation in Ireland. But there are reasons for the choice. Firstly, the end of the novel is set in Connemara and contains an illuminating, if somewhat nostalgic, assessment of the path that is being followed by the Ireland of the ‘Celtic Tiger’, a beast who at the time of writing seems to be in terminal decline. So much so that it is probably true to say that we are now in the post-Celtic Tiger phase as each day brings fresh news of an increase in inflation or unemployment. The Flood tribunal findings of corruption in political life have done nothing to dispel scepticism about our public representatives. Similarly, serious cut-backs show that the boom days are over and that the future looks a little less rosy at the beginning of the third millennium than it did at the end of the previous one. The other reason why we should take what happens to the characters in *Atomised* seriously is that it is a possible foretaste of what we will face in this country in the near future. I have long been of the view that sociological developments in France tend to manifest themselves in Ireland years later. The Paris student revolts of May ’68 didn’t really impact on Ireland until the 1970s or 80s – by that I mean that the spirit of questioning and revolt, allied strongly to Communism, did not take hold of the Irish student population as quickly as in the rest of Europe. Similarly, the crisis in vocations in the French Catholic Church, the decrease in Mass attendance, the moving away from institutional religion in order to adopt a more personal relationship with God, these phenomena were well-established in France in the 1950s (even earlier) and did not come to assert themselves in this country until the end of the last century. So we could profitably cast an eye on developments in France with a view to seeing what lies in store for us. Houellebecq mentions Swingers’ clubs, New Age communes where the hippie ideals of the 1960s are fused with contemporary favourites like Zen, environmental awareness, meditation, free love¹. These phenomena have reached our shores in recent times, as we slowly but surely shed our insular attitude and appropriate values from all over the globe.

This opening-up of our culture to outside influences has not always been positive as has been illustrated by an excellent book of essays edited by Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin, *Reinventing Ireland* (2002). This book begins by quoting from the strategy document of the

National Economic and Social Council that declared in 1999: “Ireland reinvented itself during the 1990s.” When analysing this process, the contributors to *Reinventing Ireland* engage critically with the ‘new culture’ which has emerged and is largely accepted in an uncritical manner by the vast

***Even if Ireland was
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majority of Irish people who see it as: “marking a break with the past and the coming-of-age of an enlightened, tolerant and liberal Ireland. Furthermore, while this ‘new culture’ is closely linked by its proponents with Ireland’s economic success of the 1990s, (.) the links between economy and culture have been little explored apart from a generalised correlation between economic success and a climate of national self-confidence and creativity”². Lionel Pilkington (*Religion and the Celtic Tiger the Cultural Legacies of Anti-Catholicism in Ireland*), points out how some false traditional notions of Irish Catholicism tend to dominate a lot of cultural debate about Ireland. He states that there is “a long history of liberal critical argument which holds that Ireland’s full development as a modern nation-state has been and continues to be impeded by the country’s dominant religion”(p.124). Popular opinion stated that the Catholic Church in Ireland was a repressive force that prevented us from embracing modernity in all its guises. This attitude failed to take account of the fact that material prosperity, because of its transience, is never going to satisfy an Irish population that has always had deep spiritual needs. When you remove a structure as strong as the Catholic Church has been in this country, it is imperative to find an adequate replacement. When the French scientist, Michel, arrives in Connemara towards the end of *Atomised*, he is met by an Englishman, Walcott, who provides the following assessment of the Irish situation: “Most of them around here are Catholics,” he said. “Well, that’s all changing now. Ireland is just coming into the modern world. Quite a few hi-tech companies have set up here to take advantage of the tax breaks and the low social security payments Round here there’s Roche and Lilly. And Microsoft, of course; every kid in the country dreams of working for Microsoft. People don’t go to Mass as much as they used to, there’s more sexual freedom than there was a couple of years ago, there are more nightclubs, more anti-depressants. The classic story...”³.

This is a disturbing view of life in this country. Imagine the horror of de Valera at such a scenario! Does every kid in Ireland dream of working for Microsoft? I do not think so and yet there is more than a grain of truth in the idea that young Irish people seek out well-paid employment that will allow them to indulge their liking for a nice car, holidays abroad, a house, financial comfort. It is not just a dream for a lot of them either – it is an expectation. Coming from the mouth of a self-confessed ‘outsider’, Walcott’s words do

have a special resonance. He clearly believes that the evolution of Irish society has not been kind to many of its inhabitants. The mention of ‘anti-depressants’ shows that all is not as the peaceful landscape might lead one to believe. He could also have mentioned the abuse of alcohol, the recourse to recreational drugs like Ecstasy that are freely available in the ‘nightclubs’ to which he refers. We have certainly undergone much change in the past few decades. If things are as good as we are regularly told they are, why are so many young Irish males committing suicide? Why is murder so commonplace? Why do we encounter such anger and hostility on the roads? The contrast between France and Ireland is what makes *Atomised* so interesting for the purposes of this article. That is why some brief background is needed for those who have not yet read the novel.

Today “Every kid in the country dreams of working for Microsoft. People don’t go to Mass as much..... there’s much more sexual freedom”.

It deals with the fortunes of Bruno and Michel, half-brothers who share a mother who leaves them in the care of separate grandmothers (Houellebecq himself was abandoned by his own parents and raised by his paternal grandmother) in order the better to pursue her life of sexual permissiveness. The sons are both unhappy, if for slightly different reasons, as explained by the author in an interview with Eileen Battersby: “Michel is unhappy. He wants nothing and he has nothing. But Bruno is unhappy because he wants everything and has nothing”⁴. The two boys develop different characteristics and interests. Michel becomes a famous scientist while Bruno studies Arts and dabbles in teaching for a while until an unfortunate incident with one of his female students leads to his incarceration in a psychiatric asylum after which he secures a job in the Civil Service. Subjected to unseemly physical and psychological torture in boarding school, Bruno craves love and only encounters rejection until a chance encounter in a jacuzzi with Christiane changes his life completely. Christiane, a divorcee with a healthy sexual appetite, caters for Bruno’s many needs, accompanies him to Swingers’ clubs as well as to the Cap D’Agde on the Côte d’Azur, where couples swap partners (often on the beach) and indulge their sexual fantasies. One cannot help thinking that in spite of all the promiscuity and the genuine love of Christiane, Bruno will never achieve happiness. He has been too wounded by life for him to be able to settle for a ‘normal’ existence. There is a non-judgemental approach adopted by Houellebecq with regard to his characters. But this aloofness could quite easily be confused with indifference to their fate. At no stage does the narrator betray pity for the hands that have been dealt to Bruno and Michel. Ciaran Carty offers the following assessment: “Houellebecq depicts their behaviour, particularly their sexual promiscuity – Bruno and Michel are casualties of the wave of permissiveness that seduced western society in the late 20th century – with clinical detail”⁵. He is almost too ‘clinical’ at times and one gets the impression that this reserve and control

is not all down to artistic conviction. Sometimes he seems to be indifferent to their plight. However, he does provide us with some snippets into events in France that utterly changed the life of its inhabitants.

Certainly, a liberal political élite aided the introduction of legislation that made the sexual revolution possible. Contrast these developments with what was happening in Ireland at the same period: on 14 December 1967 the French government passed the Neuwirth Act on contraception at its first reading. Although not paid for by Social security, the pill would now be freely available in pharmacies. It was this which offered a whole section of society access to the sexual revolution, which, until then, had been reserved for professionals, artists and senior management – and some small businessmen. It is interesting to note that the ‘sexual revolution’ is usually portrayed as a communist utopia, whereas in fact it was simply another stage in the rise of the individual. As the lovely phrase ‘hearth and home’ suggests, the couple and the family were to be the last bastion of primitive communism in a liberal society. (*Atomised*, pp.135-6)

We were some way behind France in terms of sexual liberation. In 1974, Houellebecq also tells us: “The age of majority was lowered to 18, and divorce by mutual consent was officially recognised. Lastly, on 28 November, after a stormy debate described by commentators as ‘historic’, the Veil act legalising abortion was adopted.” (p.80) All the legal obstacles to a libertine existence had now been removed. John McGahern’s writings show how Irish couples in the 1960s had nothing like the freedom to experiment with sex as their continental counterparts. In his short story, “My Love, My Umbrella”, a couple, who have little in common outside of the physical attraction they feel for one another, make love while protected from the rain under an umbrella. The situation is almost as quaint as the attitudes of the time to sexuality. *The Late Late Show* did much to bring debate about our views on sex into the open. While, with the benefit of hindsight, we might speak of how repressed we were, the experience of hedonism undergone by Bruno did not make him any more happy than the Irish males of his generation.

Permissiveness is not a cure for unhappiness or ennui, as Bruno realises: “Most of the people Bruno had encountered in his life had been motivated solely by the pursuit of pleasure – if one includes in the definition those narcissistic pleasures so central to self-esteem or to the admiration of others” (p.255). He makes an exception for his half-brother, Michel, however: “it seemed impossible to associate the notion of pleasure with him; but what, if anything, did motivate Michel?” (p.255) Michel had been spared the hardship of boarding school and had avoided the bullying endured by Bruno. A beautiful girl, then young woman, Annabelle, fell in love with him but wanted more than he could offer at 18. Michel was not ready, or able, to commit to a sexual relationship and Annabelle, conscious of her blossoming beauty, felt the need to experience intercourse. Bruno, who by this time had come to

know his brother, suggested that Michel and Annabelle accompany him to di Meola's commune, where their mother was a regular visitor. This trip to the US will expose Annabelle to the predatory son of the owner of the commune, David di Meola. The arrival of this beautiful young woman did not escape David's attention and he does not have to work hard to seduce her. Michel leaves the morning after the first coupling takes place. The episode left a deep mark: "Far removed from Christian notions of grace and redemption, and hostile to the concepts of freedom and compassion, Michel's world view had grown pitiless and mechanical. Once the parameters for interaction were defined, he thought, and allowing for initial conditions, actions took place in an empty, spiritless space; each inexorably predetermined." (p.104)

While depicting France as doomed, Houellebecq sees Ireland going down the same slippery slope, with its high-tech culture and new-found liberal lifestyle.

Annabelle is not portrayed as being a bad person. She too is the victim of the prevailing spirit of the time that laid undue emphasis on sex. She will long regret the pain she caused Michel. When a chance meeting brings them back together, she is finally able to explain why she abandoned him for David, the first of a series of lovers and affairs that lead to two abortions and general unhappiness. She tells Michel what happened to her: "It took me years to come to terms with the cliché that men don't make love because they're in love, they do it because they're turned on. Everyone around me knew that and lived like that – I grew up in a pretty liberal environment – but I never enjoyed the game for its own sake. In the end, even the sex started to disgust me. They (the lovers) were weak, pathetic and pretentious. In the end, it was too hurtful to know they thought of me as just another piece of meat" (pp.278-9).

This is a damning indictment of the permissive culture. What Annabelle rediscovers with Michel – tenderness, affection, commitment – means far more to her than the sordid, mindless liaisons she had with the many men whom she characterises in the quote above. Her environment had conditioned her to think that one had to experiment with sex, without ever explaining some of the problems it can lead to. She tries to have a baby by Michel, develops problems that require another abortion and is then diagnosed with cancer. She ends up taking an overdose, rather than becoming a burden to Michel and her family⁶. All of which leads to Michel's decision to come to work in a laboratory in Connemara. When his mother died, Michel, unlike Bruno, didn't feel any animosity towards her: "She just wanted to be young, that's all." (p.308). In that, she is very similar to many people today who are blindly seeking out ways to stay young by finding new partners, visiting the plastic surgeon, attempting to know pleasure in all its guises. Their quest seems to be misdirected. They are looking for answers where they cannot properly be found through the avenues they are following. The main problem confronting modern mankind is how to live in a world from which God seems

absent (Camus is a major reference point in this regard). Metaphysical problems are not resolved by acquiring money, or by experimenting with drugs and sex. In post-Christian Ireland, at the dawn of the new millennium which Michel celebrates (if that is the right verb) in Connemara, much of the existential anguish of the rest of the world was present: "All across the surface of the globe, a weary, exhausted humanity, filled with self-doubt and uncertain of its history, prepared itself as best it could to enter a new millennium" (p.354).

Was there something about the Irish landscape that inspired Michel's musings about the human condition? He was reportedly fascinated with the distant edge of the Western world and would spend much time contemplating the sea bathed in a soft, shifting light. The Book of Kells was another source of inspiration to him. He also probably saw that Ireland was not immune to the many influences that had contributed to his own unhappiness. After his disappearance, which is a suspected suicide, Walcott observed that there was "something monstrously sad" about Michel:

Even the word "sadness" seems inadequate; there was something broken in him, something completely devastated. I always got the impression that life was a burden to him, that he no longer knew how to make contact with any living thing. (p.364)

His experiments in genetics led Michel to predict that we will all be clones by 2070 – not such a far fetched prophecy as it might appear. A great admirer of Aldous Huxley, Houellebecq himself has an uncanny capacity to anticipate the way the world is developing and to lay bare some frightening scenarios. That he has chosen to live in Ireland (on Bere Island) gives him insights that only an outsider can express. While clearly not impressed with France, which he depicts in *Atomised* as being doomed, he senses that modern Ireland is going down the same slippery slope with its high-tech culture and (newly found) liberal lifestyle. We need to wake up to the dangers of spiritual and moral atrophy and heed the haunting message of *Atomised*. Otherwise, we could face the possibility of a future where humanity would disappear to give way "to a new species which was asexual and immortal, a species which had outgrown individuality, individuation and progress"(p.371). This is not a comforting thought!

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Notes

- ¹ One of the characters, Bruno, spends some time (towards the middle of the 1990s) in the Lieu du Changement, a commune founded in 1975 by a group of '68 veterans. Their plan was to create a place "where the principles of self-government, respect for individual freedom could be practised in the 'here and

now”’. Michel Houellebecq, *Atomised*, London: Vintage, 2001 (trans. Frank Wynne), p.114. Although Christianity was excluded, there was plenty of room for “a sufficiently nebulous mysticism – for these people were spiritually impoverished” (p.126). There are workshops in astrology, sensual massage, Egyptian tarot as well as courses on crystal healing, Siberian shamanism, Tantric Zen. To all intents and purposes, it evolved into “a New Age institution, while maintaining a reputation as a hedonist’s paradise, which became its unique selling point.” (p.127).

² *Reinventing Ireland*, London: Pluto Press, 2002, p.2.

³ Michel Houellebecq, *Atomised*, London: Vintage, 2001, pp.349-50.

⁴ “The Long Good Sigh”. Interview by Eileen Battersby with Michel Houellebecq in *The Irish Times Weekend Review*, June 15, 2002.

⁵ Ciaran Carty, “Return of the Zombie”, in *The Sunday Tribune*, 23 June 2002.

⁶ Christiane, who suffers from a serious back problem, ends up in a wheelchair and takes her own life for similar reasons.