

On Michel Houellebecq
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Michel Houellebecq (born 1956) is an award-winning and controversial French writer of both fiction and non-fiction. His admirers consider him a literary provocateur in the tradition of Marquis de Sade and Baudelaire, while his detractors see him as a sex-obsessed, racist, misogynist, Islamophobic peddler of sizzle and shock. He is best known for his 1998 novel *Elementary Particles*, which won the Prix Novembre, one of France's premier literary awards and has been hailed as a "nihilistic classic."¹ Unimpressed prominent American critic Michiko Kakutani called the book a "deeply repugnant read." Houellebecq's follow-up novel, *Platform*, which dealt with sex tourism and ended with the murder of the protagonist's love interest by Muslim terrorists, led to his being taken to court for inciting racial hatred.² Even though acquitted on the charge, Houellebecq left France to live in Ireland and then Spain.

An email exchange between Houellebecq and the equally controversial intellectual and journalist Bernard-Henri Levy (I won't go into Levi's story in this context) was published in the 2008 book *Public Enemies: Dueling Writers Take on Each Other and the World*.³ When I read it a year or so ago, I was only interested in Houellebecq, having read several of his books, including one he wrote early on about the American fantasy writer H. P. Lovecraft.⁴ So I just read Houellebecq's half of the exchange and paged quickly through the Levi material.

I'll do here what I did with the first two thoughts on this site back in 2007, on the French philosopher Michel Foucault and the Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima. I'll go through my copy of *Public Enemies* and take note of what I either underlined or wrote in the margin when I read the book initially--the Houellebecq half--and offer whatever comments or thoughts those responses back then prompt in me now, June, 2012. As with the Foucault and Mishima thoughts, I do this not to shed light on the writer, Houellebecq in this case, but rather to shed light on myself for my self-edification and to express some things publicly I believe worth saying. Also, I hope this thought invites you to read some of Houellebecq's writings; *Elementary Particles* would be a good place to start.

Houellebecq may or may turn out to suit your taste, but he is worth checking out.

As with the Foucault and Mishima thoughts, I'll put the Houellebecq quotes in smaller type and set them in from the right and left page margins to distinguish them from my commentaries. The one exception to this pattern, while paging through Levy's half of *Public Enemies* one of his quotes caught my eye, and I'll include it along with my response to it at the very end of this thought.

So, Houellebecq quotes in *Public Enemies* (and one by Levi) followed by my thoughts:

[Charles] Baudelaire [1821-1863, French poet, essayist, and critic] states that a great man is what he is only *in spite* of his compatriots and that he must therefore develop an aggressive force equal to or greater than the collective defensive forces of his compatriots.

I wrote "Yes" in the margin next to this quote, thinking to myself, "Yeah, right, to be a great man you have to stand up to the crowd." It seemed so unimpeachably true. But thinking about it for this thought, I've decided that "No" would have been better than "Yes" in that margin.

Rather than just laying that claim out there as he did, it would have helped if Houellebecq had defined a great man, or greatness, at least in a beginning way. Who is a great man to Houellebecq? Is he just referring to what we could all agree is transcendent greatness, Michelangelo's creations or something like that? I assume he would also include more prosaic but still admirable phenomena such as exceptional or unique excellence; superb accomplishment; ground-breaking innovations or advances; people breaking from conventionality and doing things in accordance with their own deepest wisdom and most cherished moral commitments; highly honed insight and perception; and personal autonomy and integrity and courage. I imagine he would place himself somewhere in that list. And how does he—or we—categorize people and accomplishments deemed great at a time and then later thought not to be great? Pearl Buck won the Nobel Prize in Literature back in the '30s, but is considered second rate now. And what about people like Hitler and Stalin and Mao--were they great? How about Jefferson Davis? It might be good sometime for you and me to get finer about

exactly what we mean by great men (which of course includes women) and great accomplishment. For this writing greatness is somebody and something really special, truly fine, singularly important, fresh, groundbreaking, admirable, in this general area.

Two media experiences I had this past week that called into question this Houellebecq quote about a great man being what he is in spite of his compatriots:

The first was a PBS documentary on the late talk show host Johnny Carson. The documentary was one talking head after another going on about Carson's exemplary achievements as an entertainer, and we are shown clips from the Kennedy Center Awards, and so on and so on. Carson was as good as it gets, that point came through loud and clear. Let's say for the purposes of this thought that great applied to Carson. Johnny Carson was great at what he did.

The documentary had an audio recording of Carson saying he considered being liked by his audience the most important contributing factor in his enormous success. They have to like you, he insisted. And did they like him: shot after shot of "Tonight Show" studio audiences on their feet in revival-meeting bliss cheering and applauding when Johnny made his entrance through a part in the curtain at the beginning of the show.

I've noted several places in this site that a big way to be liked--or go over, or impress, I'm broadening the concept because I think a lot of things go together here--is to make your audience feel good about themselves and their lives.⁵ And more broadening, I'm not referring to audience in just the show business or arts sense but rather the people you play your life to, whatever you do, your reference group, your crowd. One of the big ways you get your audience to like you, let's call it that--Carson's protégé David Letterman has made this point--is by staying within their frame of reference and assuring them that they are just fine as they are. Carson did that beautifully. You could have watched the "Tonight Show" every night for the thirty years he was on and never confronted anything you didn't understand or couldn't relate to and didn't basically believe, and never hear or see anything that made you feel bad about yourself. Indeed, you were safe and secure with Johnny Carson.

While Johnny Carson had his detractors, including, according to the documentary, some prominent NBC network executives, and

he had to make sure he didn't cave in to them, he most surely didn't perform his nightly television gig ducking banana peels and tomatoes. It wouldn't be accurate to say that Carson's greatness was dependent on his developing, as Houellebecq put it, "an aggressive force equal to the collective forces of his compatriots." Johnny Carson's compatriots, the ones he dealt with close up day-to-day, affirmed and supported him.

The second media experience this week was a DVD of a documentary, new at the time of this writing, on Paul Goodman called "Paul Goodman Changed My Life."⁶ Goodman (1911-1972) was a novelist, playwright, poet, psychotherapist, social critic, and leftist philosopher and activist. His book *Growing Up Absurd* was a bellwether book in the 1960s,⁷ and he influenced student and gay rights movements during those years. Goodman, largely forgotten now--although the documentary may help in this regard--matched up well to the greatness standard, at least according to the people who do the talking in today's public discourse.

Two scenes from the Goodman documentary:

An interviewee--I'm blank as to who it was now--recounting how uncompromising and courageous Goodman was putting his truths out there as he did, saying the unpopular thing, taking on the establishment, coming out about his sexuality, and so forth. Goodman sounded very much like one of the people Houellebecq is talking about, standing up to his compatriots in order to achieve greatness.

The very next scene, no segue, snap of a finger, there's Goodman standing behind at a lectern giving a talk to an audience of a thousand people, perhaps more. The camera scanned their faces: They were hanging on Goodman's every word; they couldn't have been more reverential. A thousand or more strong, nodding yes, yes, yes! Applauding, it seemed, virtually every time Goodman ended a verbal paragraph. Paul Goodman is a neat guy! Paul Goodman is *our* guy! Hurray for Paul Goodman! Watching this on the DVD I was thinking to myself, just how much courage has it taken for Goodman to be doing what he's doing right now? What is it going to cost him to be doing this?

I was a graduate student in Goodman's heyday and read *Growing Up Absurd* and several periodical pieces on him and authored by him, and perhaps some of his other books, I don't recall, and I participated in lunch table discussions about him.

What I most remember from all of that is feeling really fine about being me during those occasions. *They*--those guys over there--were uninformed. *They* were screwed up, and malevolent if not downright evil. But *me*, I was in the know and on the moral high ground, and real cool. Paul Goodman was cooler to be sure, but I was cool, no doubt about that. And Goodman didn't upset my comfort level. Taking in what he was putting out was like hearing a really good sermon on Sunday morning: it basically confirmed what I already knew and believed, and surely something needs to be done about all the bad things going on that it talked about, and I could do something about any of that if I really wanted to; but then again, it'd be OK I got back to the NBA game on television and the science fiction book I was reading. All I really needed to do after my encounters with Paul Goodman was support the good guys against the bad guys--and it was super clear who they were, nothing complicated about it--and not get in the way of the changes that needed to come about--and it was super clear what they were, nothing complicated about that either. It was all real simple, nothing to give me a headache thinking about or eyestrain staying up nights reading about; no fuss, no muss. I was on top of it and nestled securely among the good guys in life's moral drama, and Paul Goodman helped me get into that snuggly place. Paul Goodman was contributing to what I wanted at the time; whether I needed it and was being taken for a ride is something else.

Goodman's name has come up a lot in books I've read about other New York intellectuals of that era and I came away with the impression that he got invited to the right parties and was greeted warmly at the door when he arrived and that he didn't have to sit alone in his room eating Chinese take-out, and that what he was doing didn't cost him anything in his love life. As with Carson, I have the distinct sense that Paul Goodman's existence, back to the Houellebecq quote, was most definitely not characterized by applying "aggressive force equal to or greater than the collective defensive forces of his compatriots." Goodman's compatriots loved him as much as Johnny Carson's compatriots loved him. The people--call them compatriots if you want--that didn't love those two were "over there" somewhere. Which is not to say these naysayers, antagonists, opposition, however to label them, were of no negative consequence to Carson and Goodman. I'm just offering that acknowledgment and affirmation and encouragement and

support were the most salient--immediate, influential, determining--realities in their lives.

And more, I'm extrapolating from the Carson and Goodman examples to contend that this same sort of thing is true of just about anybody generally thought to be great. Name them--Churchill, Lincoln, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Einstein. Picasso. And whom do you want in our time? Obama? Queen Elizabeth? Bill Gates? Martin Scorsese? LeBron James? I assume the late Osama bin Laden doesn't qualify. How about Hugo Chavez? Anyway, my claim is that whatever great you are talking about, from day one they were not without compatriots cheering them on (including bin Laden), nestling up to them, kind of fawning over them, and getting stroked themselves in the process. To be sure, all of these greats had their adversaries, enemies, and they had to be savvy enough and tough and resilient enough to stay on course despite them, but their everyday reality wasn't being snubbed in the hallway. They had their people, all of the so-called greats did, however you want to define greatness. Van Gogh (I just read a biography of him⁸) had his admirers and colleagues; he wasn't this besieged isolate that we often portray him as being. Hitler has his coterie, Stalin did, every politician did and does, every theorist in any field you can name, psychology, physics, philosophy, you name it, did and does--or all of them I can think of anyway.

Nothing is every time, but just about every time, the main point here, greatness involves a kind of reciprocity. A deal of sorts is struck: if I like and approve of what you are doing and you make me feel enlightened and comfy and part of something, I'll pay you off by saying you are great and give you an award dinner. There are other people just as great as you are, and maybe even greater, but I don't like what they are telling me, and I don't like the personal state they put me in, so no mantle of greatness for them.

You see where I'm going with this. This mutual back scratching that is so often an aspect of greatness can keep it within the bounds of what serves people's implicit if not explicit wants and needs. It is closer to the truth to say that greatness is attained *because of* one's compatriots rather than *in spite* of them as Houellebecq asserts in the quote.

But does it have to be this way? Consider the extreme example of the *pariah*. For our purposes in this context, let's say a pariah is a person who is arguably great--or accomplished, or worthy,

whatever standard to use—but gets outside people's comfort zones and/or doesn't affirm them, and that doesn't play well at all with anybody, or seemingly doesn't, and he's attacked and silenced and exiled from the society of the informed and wholesome. An example of a pariah in one of the thoughts on this site is the seventeenth century philosopher Baruch Spinoza.⁹ Spinoza told people things they most definitely didn't want to hear, especially about religion, and got condemned and shunned in a major way for his efforts. I think of communists in the McCarthy years in this country--demonized, excluded, hurt, pariahs.¹⁰ I think of William Pierce, whom I wrote a book about in the early 2000s, who has since died. Pierce, a Ph. D in physics and a tenured university professor by the age of thirty, was a white racial advocate, which rubbed the people in power in America the wrong way and they effectively labeled him ignorant and evil and "the most dangerous man in America" and relegated him to pariah status.¹¹

When you look closely at their lives you see that out-of-bounds Spinoza and the dreaded communists and the dangerous William Pierce weren't totally alone wandering about in the wilderness tortured by hangdog gloom. There were people that cared about them, even them, and believed in them and supported them and befriended them, and there were people who loved them. Spinoza was quoted as saying "I am happy, and pass my days not in sighing and sorrow, but in peace, serenity and joy."

One of the most formative experiences of my life was to have had extended first hand experience with William Pierce. No one was more demonized and reviled by the establishment than Pierce. No one was more suppressed; no one was more marginalized. And yet William Pierce was a man at peace with himself. And he was active and productive in spite of it all.

Indeed, with the world as it is, it makes good sense, for some of us anyway, to marshal our aggressive forces, as Houellebecq puts it. But we have to stay vigilant that in the process of doing that we don't end up putting too much energy into attending to what people think of us, ingratiating them, placating them, living our lives in reference to them, and ultimately selling out to them. Most of all, it seems to me, we need to center our energies on giving all we have in us to become ourselves at our truest and best, and to manifesting that, expressing that, in both the personal and public dimensions of our lives, and letting the chips fall where they may. And if it comes

to it, living completely rejected and totally alone with our dignity and honor and self-respect. If we do that, whatever rating and ranking the world accords us, for my money we will have achieved a kind of greatness that really counts for something.

I had a fair idea of what the long downhill slope that is the second half of life would be like: the successive humiliations of old age and then death. The idea occurred to me more than once, in brief, insistent thoughts, that nothing is forcing me to live out this second half, that I had a perfect right to play hooky.

In the margin next to this quote I wrote "Not me." From what I've observed and read, Houellebecq's observation is true for a lot of people, if not, sadly, most people: life peaks at forty or forty-five and then a downward slope, including, yes, successive humiliations and then death. Of course death is inevitable for us all, but in the second half of my life, and I'm in the last part of the last half now, I'm seventy two as I write this, the trend line of my life has been upward, and it's still going up. Life is better this year than last year; I'm better this year than last year.

That things have continued on an upward slope after seventy has surprised me. I've experienced physical disability—deafness (I have very limited but functional hearing made possible by a cochlear implant), spinal stenosis, which has limited my mobility; I use a cane and can walk or stand for only a few minutes at a time), so there is that. But I assumed that at this age I would slow down mentally, and feel less prompted from within to develop myself, improve, create, express, be in the world. I thought I'd be, how to say it, older than this at this age than I am. I'm still working, and as far as I can tell my colleagues at the university and the students I teach don't perceive me as a doddering geriatric. Here I am on a Saturday morning writing up this web site thought instead of tending to the garden.

This Houellebecq quote has prompted me to think about why this is going on with me. A lot of answers come, it's not just due to one thing—genetics, personal history, current life circumstance, and other factors, play into it—but a big part of it, and something I want to get into here some is the influence of the basic meaning I have ascribed to my life for the last fifteen years or so. I put words to it in an essay I wrote for a book on education in 2005.¹² I called it an

authentic life. Approximating an authentic life has been the overarching goal of this third act of my life. It's given me direction and autonomy and resolve and impetus, thrust, to my existence since, I would say, the latter 1990s. This web site, now that I think about it, as much as anything records my attempt to construct an authentic life.

Here is how I wrote described an authentic in the 2005 book (this is the one set-in written by me):

What is an authentic life? It is an ideal for individuals to move themselves toward over the course of their lives. An authentic life is the realization of one's full humanity. It is a life-long project of sorts: to become the truest, finest, most harmonious and complete version of oneself. In contrast to an authentic life is a life characterized by alienation, reaction, artificiality, mindlessness, discordance, and cliché. This view of life underscores your and my potential for taking charge of our lives amid all the forces--both external and within ourselves--that would mold us into something contrary to who we really are and less than we could actually be. This perspective holds up the challenge to you and me, to everyone, to take responsibility--now, and next year, and the next--for the validity and measure of our being.

The project of approximating an authentic life involves a tension and interplay between two processes. It is difficult, if not impossible, to know where one of these two processes leaves off and the other picks up.

On the one hand, this orientation holds that each of us has a given nature: qualities, aspects, tendencies, which are inherent to us as human beings and as individuals. I think of such things as our physicality, cognitive capacities and--likely, and least to some extent, and probably more than we think--sexuality, personality, manner, and drives and predilections. In these areas, it is as if we are *gardeners* tending to ourselves, nurturing the unique rosebud that we are into the most beautiful rose possible. The task is to grow a rose and not an orchid or a violet, because we are a rose, that is the flower we are. And more than that, we are a *particular* rose. Our challenge during the time we have granted to us on earth is to *become* that rose.

On the other hand, this orientation also holds that in a number of crucial areas of our being we can *define* ourselves. We don't have to just nurture what is already there; we can

create ourselves. Rather than being gardeners we are *sculptors* who can shape ourselves. I think of such areas as our beliefs and values, our philosophy of life, our spiritual or religious commitments and practices, our character, our morality, our goals, our capacities, and our actions in the world. And we have the *responsibility* to mold them into a configuration that we are deeply proud of.

Through our inherent powers of observation, reason, decision, and volition or willfulness, we undertake the life project of becoming and defining and developing ourselves and manifesting or expressing that in our part of the world. The end product is a balanced life, where all the pieces fit, where each dimension of our being complements and contributes to the others. It is an existence where it all comes together into a meaningful and personally satisfying pattern: heritage, home, family, love, friendship, community, solitude, work, and play. It is an authentic life.

As I read over what I wrote in the book, it sounds grand compared to what I have planned right after I finish this section of the Houellebecq thought: driving my twelve-year-old Honda hatchback in need of a good cleaning to Hannaford's super market to pick up some groceries, and then twenty minutes on the rowing machine, and then get to a new biography of the artist David Hockney.¹³ But still, beneath the mundane events of my day-to-day existence is the project, the word I used in the quote from my book, of moving myself toward and manifesting an authentic life in the time I have allotted to me on this earth. While I realize I could play hooky the rest of my life, as Houellebecq phrases it—the 401(k) is in good shape and the townhouse is close to being paid off—I really don't want to, and I'm glad I don't want to, and I think this authentic life “guiding star” has contributed greatly to my feeling this way.

More and more frequently, and it pains me to admit it, I felt a desire to be liked. Simply to be liked, by everyone, to enter into a magical space where there was no finger-pointing, no dirty tricks, no polemics. Needless to say, on each occasion a little thought convinced me of the absurdity of this dream; life is limited and forgiveness is impossible. But thought was powerless, the desire persisted--and, I have to admit, persists to this day.

The late novelist Jerzy Kosinski, a native of Poland, taught in universities in this country back in the 1970s and '80s and noted that his students had an inordinate desire to be liked, which, he realized, gave him power over them.¹⁴ If they were doing something he didn't care for, or he wanted to assert control or superiority over them, all he had to do was communicate "I don't like you" either directly or indirectly through his posture, manner. Not only would that bring them in line, it taught them the lesson that if any of them gave him trouble he would drop the "I don't like you" bomb on them. Kosinsky, who had traveled the world, said Americans, and not just students, were particularly caught up with wanting to be liked. Of course to the extent that you are dependent on others liking you they have power over you; they are in charge of your life, not you. Plus they get attention and a leg up on you as your superior, and if they have it in for you, they make you suffer, bring you down.

Elsewhere in this site I have used the term *hook* to get at anything people think they need from others to be happy, valid, safe, anything along that line. A hook hooks you like a fish on a line. The students Kosinski was talking about had *likeness hooks*, and, to stay with the simile, until they learned to spit out that hook and/or get to waters where people aren't "fishing" for them, to a greater or lesser extent they weren't going to be able to swim their way freely.

As far as I can tell, I don't have a likeness hook. It feels better for me to be liked than disliked certainly, but within reason I'm OK with not being liked. I'm not running around looking to be liked, and I'm not going to do a pirouette to get people to like me. Which is not to say I don't have a hook. The past three or four years, perhaps five, I've realized that I have a *worthless hook*. It's way better now than in years past, but it still shows up now and again to my anguish. I'm working on it. The way my hook operates, all anybody has to do to bring me down or bring me around—and I mean anybody, I'm an equal opportunity hookee—is get across to me, "You aren't worth much of anything [or anything, period]."

With my worthless hook, people don't have to be asserting that I don't have talent, or that I'm a bad person, or that what I'm expressing or producing has no merit. Rather, the message is that whatever I am or do doesn't count for anything. It doesn't matter. I don't matter. I don't any significance, weight, in the world

because—the tacit communication--fundamentally, ontologically, I'm worthless, useless, that's just in the nature of things. There is just something about me that doesn't belong around here, or anywhere, no matter what I am or what I do. Or at least that's what I'm picking up, regardless of whether it is being transmitted; although I do believe it is being transmitted, and I'm sure somehow I am prompting it even though I don't mean to be.

I often think of my hook as a *rejection hook*, and perhaps that is a better handle for it than worthless hook, I'm not sure. I call it a rejection hook, or I guess it could be called a negation hook, because the way it plays out is that one way or another what's coming my way, or at least what I'm receiving, perceiving, is "Not you"—rejection, negation, my teaching, my writing, having me on the faculty, associating with me, being in a relationship with me. Whatever to call the hook, fundamentally it is about worth, value to the world, and not about competency or morality. I'm fine with "What you are doing isn't any good" dismissals—I can deal with them, even if they aren't pleasant experiences. I've got no capability issues. And I can handle "You're bad" messages. What hooks me is "What you are doing isn't worth anything," "It doesn't matter," "You don't matter," "There's no need for you." That will get me into a stew and preoccupied whoever is transmitting that and tap dancing and juggling flaming torches to turn that individual or group around. "I do matter! Don't you see?" "No I don't see, and even more, I'm not bothering to look, I've got better things to do."

Without fully realizing what they are doing and its consequences for them, people with a hook, whatever it is (a few possibilities: ability, intelligence, attractiveness, sex appeal, goodness) will put themselves in situations where they can play their version of the *hook game*. If, say, being liked is their hook (coming out of feelings that they are basically unlikeable, most likely picked up in childhood), they will get themselves around people who don't like them and try to turn those people around—that's the game--with the idea that if they can do that successfully every single time, no exceptions, they will become loveable and thus free of their hook and the bad feeling about themselves it stems from and life will be just fine and they can move on to other, good, things. Needless to say, that is irrational and trying to win a poker hand with a pair of deuces, as well as expending time and energy that could be better spent doing something else with somebody else.

Getting past hooks and their bases is a bigger issue I can be handle legitimately in this context, and I'm not sure I'd be up to it if I took the time to try to do it. I'll leave it that it seems to me the steps include figuring out what your hook is and where it came from and what it is costing you, deciding that you've had enough of that hook, and noticing when you are in your particular hook game and folding your cards and leaving the table; no more of that game and, if possible, those players. I will say that I must have done something right with my worthless hook—or rejection hook, whatever to call it. Go ahead and reject me, negate me, tell me I don't matter, and see if I chase you. I bet I don't, and it wasn't long ago that I would have in a big way.

Misanthropic apathy is the greatest danger: that bleating, sterile sulkiness that makes one hole up in a corner constantly muttering "arseholes, the lot of them" and, quite literally, doing nothing else.

I wrote "agreed" in the margin here. I've concluded that happiness--in the sense of a pervasive and lasting feeling of satisfaction, an experience of one's life being good, that one is on course, treading the right path--is a result of getting positive things accomplished, not staying holed up in the corner badmouthing people and feeling put upon, ain't they awful. The challenge is to quit attending to other people's lives and start attending to your own, to figuring it out and making it work, to expressing your uniqueness and creating something good for yourself and the world. Most likely the arseholes, or whatever to call them, aren't wasting their time focusing on you and stewing over what you are doing; they are getting on with their lives and having a good time. Learn from them and start doing the same.

In moments of rare good humor, I have subscribed to Nietzsche's famous dictum: That which does not kill me makes me stronger (most of the time I would be tempted, more prosaically, to think, That which does not kill me hurts me, and eventually weakens me).

I jotted "helpful" next to this one. My take on it, somewhat different from Houellebecq's, is that nothing—or nothing I can think of anyway--is just one way, simply this *or* that. Rather, it is this *and* its

polar opposite, or at least it includes contrasting aspects or elements. Whatever is so is also not so, at least to some extent and in some contexts. True, as Nietzsche affirmed, whatever hits in life you can manage to withstand do make you stronger. But they also chip away at you, injure you, diminish you, make you weaker at the same time they strengthen you, and this has to be kept in mind and taken into account when deciding what's going on with you and what to do.

I remember enormously appreciating the letter Philippe Solers wrote and later published. His message might be summed up: Flee. Don't play their game. Don't allow yourself to succumb to the temptation of heroism.

The "reality embodies contrasting elements" idea applies here. Something might be good, but that doesn't preclude its opposite also being good. Sometimes it is best to stand up and fight and be heroic. Sometimes it is good to play their game. And sometimes it is best to flee, to run, go someplace else. It's a judgment call you have to make in a particular circumstance at a particular time and with reference to who you are and what matters to you and what you are trying to accomplish at a particular time. When you are getting clear about the fleeing options (there is never just one place to flee to), you have to think through how each of them is different and better or worse than staying where you are in the various ways you could do that. And you also have to remember that wherever you might go you'll take yourself as you are at that time along with you. And since both the world and the quality of your existence tend to mirror your state of being, you have to keep in mind that you just might re-create a circumstance that parallels the one you are in now that is unsatisfying enough to make you think about leaving it. So whatever you decide to do, you'd best work on yourself to get to a personal place where you can live well wherever you decide it's best to be.

The singer Kenny Rogers has it right: you have to know when to hold them and know when to fold them. And you have to keep in mind that when you fold them you are only preventing yourself from losing money, you aren't making money. While it's a good thing not to lose money, you only make money when you get

yourself into a good game and have a strong hand to play and play it well.

The propensity to confess that I manifest from time to time comes, it seems to me, from two different sources. The first is my deep-rooted conviction that no confession can change anything about one's personality, cannot make good or worse whatever flaws we have . . . The second is my extraordinary overestimation of myself, which leads me to believe that no confession can ever exhaust the infinite richness of my personality, that one could draw endlessly on the ocean of my possibilities--and that if someone believes they know me, they are simply lacking information.

Again, one way or another, never and always. I agree that confession can be a dead end activity, but I also I think it can be useful in making sense of oneself and the world, and that that knowledge has the possibility of guiding positive change in both realms of existence. Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima's wrote about the virtues of a literary form combining confession and criticism in his lengthy essay published three years before his death, *Sun & Steel*.¹⁵ Although he didn't go very far with either confession or criticism in that writing, he set the concept out there and gave an indication of how it could play out in practice, and I picked up on it. My commentaries on my underlines and comments in the margin in response to *Sun & Steel* was the basis of the second thought for this sight, written one month after its inception back in 2007. It's the same pattern I am using here with the Houellebecq book.

I have played some with Mishima's confession-and-criticism concept and think of it as an integration of self-revelation (rather than just confession) and analysis, critique, and advocacy (rather than just criticism), and I have employed it a good deal in this site over the past five years. I feel certain that the confession, self-revelation, in these site thoughts and writings has changed me for the better, including improved some of my flaws, and I like to think it has helped shed light on both the private and public dimensions of our lives in this society and culture. I see this overall approach as a legitimate scholarly form. It does bring the person of the writer into considerations, however, and I can understand how a lot of people, particularly academics, would be uncomfortable with that. Actually, I'm uncomfortable doing it a good bit of the time, but I'm

committed to getting to the root of what I care about the best I can, and often that involves bringing personal, and sensitive, things about my own life to bear on whatever I'm exploring or spelling out.

As for the second part of the Houellebecq quote, I don't believe I overestimate myself, and I certainly don't think in terms of my infinite richness or oceans of possibilities, anything like that. Frankly, I wish I thought more highly of myself and where I might take my life than I do. If Houellebecq really has anything close to the exalted view of himself expressed in this quote and isn't just speaking ironically and facetiously, it must be nice.

I don't think any of us can ever be known completely by another human being, but at the same time being known, or understood, is on a continuum: we can be known more accurately by someone than before, and that matters for something. One of the choices I need to make is when to try to get someone or some people to know me better. Potentially it has value.

I sometimes feel like Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo*, feeling it appropriate to give an account of his dietary habits, like his taste for thick oil-free cocoa, convinced that nothing that concerns him could entirely without interest; and what is worse, one does read these pages with a certain pleasure, and these pages may well outlive *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

I squirmed a bit when I read this, because I have given accounts of my dietary habits in these web site thoughts. Although it was to make what I considered a useful point and surely didn't reflect the notion that nothing about me is entirely without interest. The world has made it clear that there is little if anything about me, the person hitting these computer keys at the moment, which is of interest, I get it.

The second part of this quote hit home. I do have concern that readers are picking up on the dietary habits sort of material in my material and missing the more fundamental things I'm expressing. But too late now; I'm just going with my impulses these days, saying whatever is to be said to get my ideas across, and if it's dietary habits, something like that, so be it.

Deep down I don't really care about my adversaries (what adversaries?).

From reading his half of *Public Enemies*, I don't believe Houellebecq here. From what I can pick up, he cares greatly about what people think of him--friends, enemies, critics, fellow writers, everybody. This is one sensitive guy to how he comes across. There is nothing all that bad about that, but I do think we do best by ourselves if we are as ruthlessly objective about ourselves as possible. Either we care what our adversaries—or anybody else—thinks or we don't, and that either affects our thoughts and actions or it doesn't, and if it does affect them it does so in the way it does, and we should do our best to be aware of all that. It's not good if we tell ourselves we don't care what other people think when we really do, because without realizing it we might be playing our lives to them and their responses to us rather than doing what we ought to be doing.

I'm getting old now, I'm getting weaker, I would like to be happy before I die.

I'm not just getting old, I'm getting *really* old, *scary* old. And indeed, I'm getting weaker. I've gone deaf and my back has given out and I'm tired as hell all the time. But the good thing, I'm going to be happy before I die, because I am happy right now, satisfied with my life, content with it, at peace with it. I could be happier and I'm working on that, but basically I'm happy, and I'm so thankful for that, because I spent just about all my life, until the last few years, deep in the wrong end of the happy-unhappy continuum. I'm very grateful to the people and circumstances that helped me get to my current state, and grateful for whatever it is about me and wherever it came from that has given me the commitment and wherewithal to work really hard and effectively, for years and years, to move myself such a long way in the happiness direction.

All I can do is shut up and accept that I live in a world where the general will exercises too great a pressure on the will of the individual. In practice, I can try to find a corner where I can go and die, some isolated spot where, all alone, I can give myself over to my modest vices.

We don't have to shut up and go over in a corner and live all alone with modest vices and die. We can find good work to do and friends and love, and we can live really well and be happy, and commit ourselves to dying a long, long time from now, and we can do that

right here, in this place, and we can tell the world and its pressures to f--- off.

[Speaking of Ireland where he had gone to live.] The level of taxation is quite low in general: it is a different concept of the State. With this level of taxation, you can feel you are dealing with essential, incontestable expenditure--law and order, refuse collection, road maintenance. You never think that the government has committed itself to some bold policy on which you would be called on to have an opinion, for which they would ask for your support. All this is calming. You don't really have the impression of participating, or at least you don't have to ask yourself any questions. All this, in a word, *depoliticizes*. I suppose there is a psychological threshold that is dangerous for government to go beyond. It is interesting to note that different churches, regardless of the geographical or historical conditions that shaped them, are more or less agreed on the extent of the financial contribution they can expect from their faithful: 10 percent of their income, no more.

One of the seventeen interviews I conducted that made up my 2004 book *One Sheaf, One Vine* was with a college student from California I called Glenn in the book.¹⁶ His mother was Irish and he had spent summers in Ireland growing up. "I'm really glad I went," he told me, "because it made me realize at a young age that America and California aren't the whole world, that there are different places from what we have here. I always looked forward to the summer and enjoyed going back there. I love Ireland and I'd like to live there, and maybe some day I will." I have learned that he is now living in Ireland—he actually did it. That underscores for me that while we can stay in this place and live our way (my last comment), we can also go someplace else if we decide it is better for us there. Houellebecq's life is an example of that fact—he left France when he found it aversive.

I am organically, viscerally incapable of obeying. Incapable of taking orders, I take no pleasure in giving orders. It is something I do reluctantly, only for brief periods and only when absolutely necessary.

I'm capable of taking orders, but I sure don't want to. I don't have

to take orders in the university where I am a professor and I like it that way. If I were in a circumstance where somebody was telling me what to do, I'd get out of it if I could. I give orders in my teaching—assigned readings and papers, scheduled topics, pre-planned class activities I direct—and it gnaws on me. I'd much prefer a situation where I provide a rich and varied learning context for students and give them the freedom and responsibility to chart their way within it and support them while they do that. It's a kind of mentoring arrangement. I go into this orientation in some detail in a writing for this site called "Robert Henri on Education." Henri was an American painter and art teacher back in the first part of the twentieth century (Edward Hopper was one of his students) whose perspective on education has influenced my thinking. Another influence has been the educational ideas of psychologist Carl Rogers. I report on my experiences with Rogers when I was just starting out in teaching in the thought, "On est and the Human Potential Movement." A writing that explicates my thinking in this area in "Autotelic Education: A Concept." An example of a university program aligned with the principles I'm getting at here is the site writing "An Undergraduate Education Program." One of the singular contradictions in my work life has been that while I've conceptualized and advocated a student-autonomy-and-initiative approach I've never given over the time and energy to incorporate it to any real extent in my own instruction. I need to decide what to do about that.

I have always felt the deepest mistrust for those who take up arms in the name of whatever cause. I have always felt there was something deeply unwholesome about warmongers, troublemakers, rabble-rousers. What is a war or revolution in the end but a hobby fueled by spite, a bloody, cruel sport?

War as a bloody, cruel sport, a hobby, is a good way to look at it. Last night I watched a World War II documentary on television with a lot of eighty-some-year-olds recounting their experiences in the Italian campaign. All of them were upbeat. None of them said anything like: How did I get involved in that bloodbath? People around me were getting their heads blown off, and we were thousands of miles from home trying to shoot other people's brains out that we didn't even know. It was crazy. Who got me into that?

How'd it happen? Fifty million people in Europe dead—think about that number!--cities and countryside decimated. It absolutely couldn't have been avoided? Absolutely no way to negotiate those issues? Would those bad guys we were trying to murder still be in power in Europe if we hadn't done that? Would they be running the city government in Kansas City right now? They would? Really?

I picked up from these old veterans that that time in combat all those years ago was the highlight of their lives. Everyday Joes and, hey, they got to play in the Super Bowl of warfare; they were somebody, right down there on the field in the middle of the action in a uniform playing the game with everybody watching and rooting for them. The rest of their lives has been spent stocking shelves at a hardware store in a checkered flannel shirt and keeping the grass cut and being nobody. War is hell and all that, but it is also a good time, a high—you've got your buddies and a cause and excitement and something really big is on the line, just like with football in high school but even more so. War's a great sport when you think about it.

If there is a single idea that runs through all my novels it is the absolute irreversibility of all processes of decay once they have begun. Whether this decline concerns a friendship, a family, a larger social group, or a whole of society, in my novels there is no forgiveness, no way back, no second chance. Everything that is lost is lost absolutely and for all time.

Everything that starts to decay isn't lost absolutely and for all time. Friendships can be saved, and so can marriages and relationships with one's children, careers can be resurrected, one's health can be turned around, and so can social and political arrangements be reformed or transformed. Forgiveness exists, ways back exist, second chances exist. Redemption exists. There's hope for us.

Nobody gives a shit about living on in the memory of mankind (not even me, and I write books.) So why do I spend so much time correcting my proofs? I don't know. Proust was surprised that he did. I suppose it must have something to do with the idea of a job well done, which is a propensity of man, who is essentially an animal that makes, which to my mind includes books. I've been lying through my

teeth since the start of this paragraph. As an author, of course I want to live on, but on the other hand I haven't lied at all, since it's true that I would rather really live on, to live on physically, as physically as possible.

I slave over editing this web site material, and like Proust and Houellebecq I ask myself, why I do that? I think Houellebecq gets at a big part of it when he talks about the human impulse to do a job well. I'm pushed from within me to do that best I can with the web site writings and thoughts, and when I feel I've taken it as far as I can I'm exhausted, yes, but I also experience a sense of well-being for completing—not just finishing—the job. It's not perfect or anywhere near that, I know that, but I was responsible to the work, I gave it all I had, and I'm ready to go on to the next thing.

And yes, I want to stay alive as long as I can. It's really gotten good the last few years and I don't want it to end now.

In general, I'm quite happy with myself. I tell myself, "Hey, I did that."

I too am quite happy with myself, and that's quite new, in this last decade of a long life. While there is some "Hey, I did that" going on with me, it's much more, "Hey, look what I have become compared to where I started."

This last quote is from the Levi half of *Public Enemies*. It caught my eye as I was paging through to the next Houellebecq entry.

Michel Foucault in his very last texts writes as to why anyone embarks on the adventure of writing, which is you write in order to find out not so much who you are as who you are becoming. I believe that what is at stake in a book is not being yourself, finding yourself, coinciding with your truth, your shadows, the eternal child within, or any of that other idiotic stuff, but rather changing, becoming other than the person you were before beginning and whom the book's own growth has rendered obsolete and uninteresting.

The philosopher Michel Foucault was the subject of the very first thought on this site back in 2007, and, as Levi has picked up on, Foucault spoke to me about the reason I write. Putting together this

site has been about expressing myself honestly, the best I can, on topics that matter most to me. I hope it has been of some use to readers. But so important to me, it has helped me clarify who I really am under all the conditioning I've undergone over the course of my life and what I'm becoming and should become and how I can get where I am to where I want to go in the, now, very limited time left to me on this earth. I'm different, and better, in 2012 than I was in 2007, and I know this site has played a major role in making that happen.

Notes

1. Michel Houellebecq, *The Elementary Particles* (Vintage, 2001).
2. Michel Houellebecq, *Platform* (Vintage, 2004).
3. Bernard-Henri and Michel Houellebecq, *Public Enemies: Dueling Writers Take on Each Other and the World* (Random House, 2011).
4. Michel Houellebecq, *H.P Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* (Gollancz, 2008).
5. An example is the writing on this site, "Ken Burns' Show Business."
6. I rented the Goodman documentary from Netflix, and it should be available at a video store.
7. Paul Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd* (Vintage, 1962).
8. Steven Neifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life* (Random House, 2011).
9. See the thought on this site, "On Being a Modern Day Spinoza."
10. See the thought on this site, "On The New McCarthyism."
11. Robert S. Griffin, *The Fame of a Dead Man's Deeds: An Up-Close Portrait of White Nationalist William Pierce* (1stBooks Library, 2001).
12. Robert S. Griffin, *While There's Time: Conservatism and Individualism in Education* (Xlibris, 2005).
13. Christopher Simon Sykes, *David Hockney: The Biography* (Nan A. Talese, 2012).
14. See, James Park Sloan, *Jerzy Kosinski: A Biography* (Penguin, 1996).
15. Robert S. Griffin, *One Sheaf, One Vine: Racially Conscious White American Talk About Race* (1stBooks Library, 2004).