
The Heretic and the Philosopher

Public Enemies: Dueling Writers Take On Each Other and the World

by Michel Houellebecq
and Bernard-Henri Lévy

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Reviewed by Benjamin Kerstein

To its credit, France may be the last country in the Western world to take its writers seriously. The only downside to this is that, as a result, French writers tend to take themselves seriously as well—sometimes too seriously, to put it mildly. Now, it is probably better for a society to worship self-absorbed writers than self-absorbed rock stars, but that is a matter of taste. What is certain is that, every so often, the egomaniacal swamp that is French literary culture produces something truly unique, which even non-Francophones will want to read.

Public Enemies: Dueling Writers Take On Each Other and the World, an illuminating email correspondence between New Philosopher and public gadfly Bernard-Henri Lévy and controversial novelist Michel Houellebecq, is a good example of

this phenomenon. It is almost impossible to imagine a country other than France publishing such an exchange, let alone one in which the outcome is a bestseller. Then again, little was left to chance: Sensing that sparks might fly between two of France's most renowned intellectuals, the legendary publishing house Flammarion initiated the correspondence; months before its publication, rumors of a major book by two unnamed literary superstars were leaked to the press.

Despite its somewhat mercenary origins, *Public Enemies* succeeds in providing a fascinating glimpse into the minds of a pair of men who, whether one loves or hates them (and many do both), are widely acknowledged as two of the most important thinkers in Europe today. The result, despite all of the well-known drawbacks of French intellectual discourse—its opacity, its verbosity, its at times unbearable self-regard—is a spectacle not to be missed by anyone who cares deeply about ideas and the people who give birth to them.

The participants—or, as the book's subtitle aptly calls them, the “duelists”—in question could not have been more perfectly cast. They represent two extremes of the French liter-

ary scene: Lévy is one of the founders, and perhaps the most famous member, of the intellectual movement known as the “New Philosophers,” a group of left-wing French thinkers who, in the 1970s, broke with the radical left over its support for totalitarianism in the USSR, China, and elsewhere in the communist world. Flying the banner of humanism, Lévy has spent most of his career as a “disaster tourist,” traveling the world and advocating on behalf of oppressed peoples everywhere, including the Darfuris, the Bosnians, the Kurds, and, most recently, the Libyan rebels. Back in France, however, he is a bona fide celebrity, often appearing on television in suitably glamorous clothing and haircuts, and generally conducting himself more like a movie star than a man of ideas.

His interlocutor is a far more difficult case. Michel Houellebecq is one of the best-selling writers in Europe, identified with a new literary and artistic movement known as “depressionism,” which critiques modern society by emphasizing its most dismal aspects. His unremittingly bleak and viciously satirical novels, which have been charged with everything from nihilism to fascism, depict a Western civilization that is being eaten away from the inside, crumbling under the weight of its own decadence and

depravity. His scathing attacks on Islam, immigration, the European Union, feminism, New Age religions, and psychiatry have led the press to identify him with the French radical right, although he himself denies any political allegiances. His main concern appears to be opposing what he calls “the official version” of life, which holds “that everything is fine, that things are getting better and better, and that the only people who deny this are a bunch of neurotic nihilists.” Despite the often violent opposition his work evokes in French literary circles, Houellebecq received the prestigious Goncourt Prize in honor of his novel *La Carte et le Territoire* (“The Map and the Territory”), cementing his reputation as a cultural icon.

Other than their shared celebrity, Lévy and Houellebecq could not be more different. Lévy, a secular Jew, feels a profound affinity for his forefathers’ tradition, even if he maintains a certain distance from it. “To provide a foundation for that idea of human dignity on which I’ve staked my belief,” he writes, “I’ve found nothing to match the lesson of Rabbi Akiva and Emmanuel Levinas.” Houellebecq, by contrast, is a confirmed atheist. Lévy is a man of the left, remarking at one point that,

like Sartre, the bourgeois make him nauseous. Houellebecq seems to consider politics in general a vaguely insane pastime, claiming, “The rights of man, human dignity, the foundations of politics, I’m leaving all that aside, I have... nothing that would allow me to validate such standards.” Lévy has faith in progress and the possibility of a better world. Houellebecq thinks the world simply is what it is—which is to say, a pretty vile place all around. Moreover, he insists, the sooner we stop lying to ourselves about how awful it is, the sooner we can get on with our essentially meaningless lives. Finally, Lévy believes in the intellectual’s responsibility to act on behalf of his fellow man and humanity in general. Houellebecq considers such a sentiment absurd at best, and clearly prefers the company of literature to that of human beings.

Nonetheless, the two men share an unmistakable sense of kinship—the source of which, it quickly becomes clear, is the hatred they both stir up among many of their countrymen. “I believe,” Houellebecq writes, “that the person who manages to work out why the two of us, so different from each other, became the chief whipping boys of our era in France will, in doing so, understand many things about the history of France during this period.” He sums up their en-

emies’ case against them in typically caustic terms: “We are both rather contemptible individuals,” he notes, calling Lévy “a specialist in farcical media stunts” who “since childhood, has wallowed in obscene wealth,” and “a philosopher without an original idea but with excellent contacts.” With regard to himself, Houellebecq writes that he is a “nihilist, reactionary, cynic, racist,” and “shameless misogynist,” who belongs to “the rather unsavory family of ‘right-wing anarchists.’” He is no more forgiving of his literary talents, portraying himself as an “unremarkable author with no style” who “achieved literary notoriety some years ago as the result of an uncharacteristic error in judgment by critics who had lost the plot.”

At first glance, then, the two men seem thrown together less by shared passion than by common objects of animosity. Or, as Houellebecq writes, “We are up to our necks in *contempt*.” Certainly, they disagree about a great many things, sometimes ardently so: In response to Houellebecq’s political apathy, which he justifies by Goethe’s adage “Better injustice than disorder,” Lévy claims that it “makes my blood run cold.” Houellebecq gets Lévy particularly wound up when he freely admits that he rather enjoyed visiting Putin’s authoritarian Russia, especially because its discothèques are

frequented by so many “sumptuous blondes.”

Their disagreements over religion are no less intense. Though Houellebecq admits that “a world with no God, with no spirituality, with nothing, is enough to make anyone *freak out completely*”—and though he spends a surprising amount of time quoting the pious French mathematician Blaise Pascal—he nonetheless states that, “The only thing is, I still don’t believe in God.” Instead, he writes, his one unshakable belief is in “*the absolute irreversibility of all processes of decay* once they have begun.” This principle, he asserts, is “more than organic, it is like a universal law that applies also to inert objects; it is literally *entropic*.” Everything, in other words, is dying, and this is the one and only constant of the universe of which we can be absolutely certain.

Lévy identifies this idea with the philosophy of the Greek atomists, and responds by claiming fealty to “the great alternative narrative to that of the Epicureans. It’s the one that begins roughly with that other book that is the Bible, and in the Bible, Genesis.” Against Houellebecq’s apparent nihilism, Lévy asserts a secular point of view that draws its inspiration from the biblical story of creation. It is, he claims, “a Jewish monadology” that lacks a God, but

retains a sense of a basic moral order to the universe.

At this point, the two come around, unavoidably, to the subject of Judaism. It is a sensitive matter, one very close to Lévy’s heart. Indeed, Lévy is at pains to explain the intricacies of traditional Judaism to what must have been a slightly bemused Houellebecq, whose first reaction is simply to say, “Personally, I don’t believe in Jews. Or, to be more precise, I don’t want to believe. Or, to be precise, I don’t know anything about the subject.” Surprisingly, however, given Houellebecq’s generally caustic attitude toward religion (and everything else), it is on this issue that these two very different men begin to come together. Discussing the shift of religious feeling in Europe toward “ecological fundamentalism mixed in some cases with left-wing alter-globalization [the global justice movement] and in others with half-witted New Age cults,” Houellebecq calls the phenomenon “a sort of neopanthemism,” and remarks, “It’s comforting to know that the Jews will be there to oppose it.” Some pages later, he even admits that “I implicitly recognize a certain validity in the Jewish destiny.”

To adopt a measure of Houellebecq’s cynicism, one might argue that his admiration for Judaism may have something to do with the fact that he is violently hated by two of

the most antisemitic forces in Europe today: the far left and radical Islam. “Among our most constant and bitter enemies,” he writes to Lévy, are “the loathsome, terrifying proliferation of far-left sites that... in keeping with the maximalist logic of the Internet... almost go so far as to call for us to be killed.” He continues,

It’s here that you realize that the unholy collusion between the far-left and radical Islam is not a fantasy dreamed up by Giles-William Goldnadel [a well-known right-wing French pro-Israel activist], but is something that is increasingly becoming a reality. I leave the accountability of those who find excuses for Islam because it’s the “religion of the poor,” or who look for points of agreement between Marxist thought and *shariah* law, but I will say that every antisemitic attack or murder in the French *banlieues* [suburbs] owes something to them.

It seems that Houellebecq sees something of himself in the Jews, or something of the Jews in himself. When he remarks that “long before anyone else, the Jews developed a sense of humor that, sadly, makes it possible for them to endure almost anything,” he could just as easily be writing about himself. And, perhaps because their enemies are his enemies, he seems to harbor an uncomplicated and unpretentious admiration for the Jews’ determination to defend themselves. “It is a fundamental change,”

he writes, “and a real joy, to see *Israel fighting* these days.”

Possibly because he himself is Jewish, Lévy adopts a more resigned tone. “The pack,” he tells Houellebecq of their mutual antagonists, “is stupid.... So unbelievably stupid. It’s like a great lump of an animal that can’t see beyond the end of its nose. And fundamentally it takes so little to disturb it, to make it lose its head, its radar, to disorient it, to get away from it.” Yet instead of obsessing over their detractors, Lévy, for the first time, takes control of the conversation and steers it in a different direction, one that leads to the most edifying, least sensational, and, indeed, most beautiful portion of the book: Lévy and Houellebecq begin to discuss writing.

It is here that Lévy truly begins to shine, and one starts to grasp that there is a great deal more to his Judaism than a mere solidarity with oppressed minorities or a sentimental attachment to his ancestors’ heritage. Instead, it is indelibly connected to the act of *writing*. “The rabbis,” Lévy writes, “stated that it was words that gave worlds their substance.” He continues,

And I must say that when I’m down, when I feel like a real prick, when I’m ashamed of all the tricks and reminders I need to make sure I don’t forget

the Darfuris or the Afghans, I can tell myself that at least I'm faithful to the great and lofty lesson of those sages.

There is no life outside of words; that's the basis of their doctrine.

In order for there to be life, you have to get the right sparks from the white-hot stone of words—that's the heart of the Talmud.

Pretentious? Certainly. Arguable? Without a doubt. But Lévy is unquestionably *sincere*. He believes that "art is like the Messiah, of whom the Maharal of Prague said that he would never be such-and-such a special person coming at a special moment in time to perform a particular miracle in a particular place. The Maharal said, he's you, he's me, he's any of us at any time in history and no matter where, as long as he's faithful to the Torah.... In the same way, art is this verse, this page of prose.... At least, that's the way I work." No matter what "the pack" says or does, Lévy seems to be saying, we will continue to put one word in front of the other, in the service of our own Torah, our own commandments, and perhaps we will even produce something extraordinary—and *that* will be our revenge.

Houellebecq, unsurprisingly, takes an earthier approach to the subject, depicting writing as a kind of addiction, or something akin to a recurring attack of mania. "What's my maximum?" he asks. "Between five and ten pages, I'd say. After that you have

to get blind drunk, calm the machine, wait for tomorrow, when it all starts up again." Slowly, however, the truth begins to shine through. "Rather than dig within myself for some hypothetical truth," writes Houellebecq, "I prefer to feel characters being born.... I don't know why, but I need this other life. You, I believe, are in much the same boat."

Indeed he is. In fact, as much as Lévy claims that his Judaism is Godless, it is clear that he *does* have something like a deity in mind, and a compelling one at that. Citing the nineteenth-century Rabbi Haim of Volozhin, the preeminent student of the Vilna Gaon, he asks,

What is the point of not exactly books but the Book? What is the point of the centuries spent in schools in the hairsplitting interpretation of the Law when nobody can have the last word? It is what prevents the world from collapsing, from falling into ruins and dust, because God created the world but immediately withdrew from it, abandoning it to itself and its self-destructive forces, so that only study, only letters of fire projected in columns toward the sky, can prevent it from undoing itself and keep it standing. In other words, the commentaries are not reflections but columns, in a world that without them would return to nothingness. Books are not a mirror but the girders of the universe, and that's why it's so

important that there should continue to be writers.

There's no word to describe this but theology, and it's clear that if anything gives Lévy his power as both a writer and a critic, it is this intensely felt—if stubbornly denied—religious passion.

This passion is not unfamiliar to Houellebecq, again despite all protestations to the contrary. Indeed, he at one point lets it slip that he was once, and not for a short time, a practicing Catholic. "I can picture myself on many Sundays *going to mass*," he recounts,

something I did for a long time, ten years, maybe, twenty years, wherever I happened to be living in Paris.... How I loved, deeply loved the magnificent ritual, perfected over the centuries, of the mass! "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed." Oh yes, certain words entered me, I received them into my heart. And for five to ten minutes every Sunday, I believed in God; and then I walked out of the church and it all disappeared.

Not entirely, it would seem. Indeed, once one discovers this unexpected facet of Houellebecq's biography, it becomes obvious that his work—however atheistic it may be in intellectual terms—contains a certain unmistakably Catholic pathos. "Let's state the obvious," he writes. "Man is

not, in general, a morally admirable creature. To delicately state something less obvious: man, in general, has enough in him to admire that which, morally, is beyond him and to behave accordingly." The distance between this and the Catholic idea of a fundamentally flawed yet redeemable human nature is very slight indeed.

Considered from this point of view, Houellebecq and Lévy's dialogue—and not just on the topic of religion—is quite an extraordinary thing. A metaphysical debate between a Jew and a Christian is no longer a common occurrence, yet here it is, in all its glory. On one side, we have Lévy, with his God who hides his face, obsession with morality, and faith in the redemptive power of "hairsplitting interpretation." And on the other side, there is Houellebecq, who insists that salvation must come from our willingness to acknowledge the unworthiness of man and the fallen world in which he lives.

Perhaps it says something positive, even encouraging, about this age of ours that in the end, these two disputatious theologians agree on more than they disagree. They concur, for one thing, on the identity of their adversaries; likewise, they are both certain that, in the end, they and their work will outlive the opposition. They even manage to agree, sometimes surprisingly, on

certain aspects of the other's point of view. "Maybe it is time for me too," Houellebecq muses, "to say my 'farewell to reason.' Reason... which has never helped me write a single line; reason, which, all my life, has done nothing but torment me with the desolate nature of its conclusions." Lévy, for his part, seems suddenly freed from the cycle of endless argument. "My impression," he writes to Houellebecq of their correspondence, "is that instead of endangering myself, I've been liberated and that I'm ready to reengage with that adventure of the novel that I tasted twenty years ago and which since then... I've been afraid to return to." That, he says to Houellebecq in a touching passage, is "why I believe that you will write more poetry and I'll write another novel."

There is no doubt that Lévy and Houellebecq have earned at least part of their unsavory reputations, and *Public Enemies*, as fascinating as it may be, certainly attests to that. Lévy can indeed be pretentious, flamboyant, and absurdly long-winded. When he writes things like "When I say the 'ego,' clearly I don't mean His Royal Highness with its narcissism, its mirror, its store of stratagems and secrets. I'm thinking of this highly unstable, improbable, fragile, sometimes tiny ego that is

nothing more than the subject of the literary adventure, its real 'cruel theater,' the agent of its construction and deconstruction," he comes off more as a parody of a French philosopher than a real one. Indeed, while Lévy's side of the correspondence is by far the larger of the two, one often feels that he is writing more than Houellebecq but saying less. The art of filling pages is not, unfortunately, the same as being profound. This is not to say that Lévy has nothing serious or even interesting to say, but he does take a long time to say it, and one is sometimes tempted to skim past his seemingly endless clauses in order to finally arrive at the point.

Houellebecq, for his part, wears his flaws on his sleeve: He is succinct where Lévy is verbose and obscure, but quite often one senses the presence of the lazy provocateur. Early in the correspondence, for example, he is clearly baiting Lévy by appearing to be far more outrageous and shocking than he actually is. It is only once the conversation turns to writing that one gets the sense that Houellebecq is being absolutely sincere, and the fact that he reveals himself to be, essentially, a rather touchingly wounded romantic makes all the adolescent posturing of the earlier sections seem even more unnecessary and pointless.

Even these flaws, however, do not detract from the most important

revelation of *Public Enemies*: The fact that both Lévy and Houellebecq are, ultimately, believers. Their exchange shows that, far from being the nihilists their critics accuse them of being, they are, if anything, the anti-nihilists of our age. They believe quite fervently, and they believe in many things. Lévy believes in Judaism, in morality, in responsibility, in speaking out, and in the power of words. Houellebecq believes in telling the truth, in being true to oneself, and in the necessity of living one's life as honestly as possible. And they both believe, more than anything else, in writing. And because they believe, they remain hopeful.

Indeed, if there is anything truly remarkable about this volume, it is that two of the most hated—and certainly most uncompromising—writers in Europe today, men absolutely dedicated to bringing us the bad news, whether we want to hear it or not, end their correspondence on a rather optimistic note. Both of them appear to think that, despite all the miseries they have chronicled throughout their long careers, and despite the best efforts of many to make *them* just as miserable, abandoning oneself to that misery is out of the question. Reading *Public Enemies*, one is almost reminded of the final scene in Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, in which the hero, too badly wounded to escape, faces down

a squad of Spanish fascists. Certain of his imminent demise, he nonetheless expresses the certainty that “the world is a fine place, and worth fighting for.” Lévy and Houellebecq are not in such *extremis*, but they do represent two sides of a disillusioned and often impotently uncertain culture. That the two of them can find, not only in themselves but also in each other, reason enough to hope would seem to be in this darkening age nothing less than a ray of light.

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