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Piece on the Prix Goncourt Winning Novel by Michel Houellebecq, *The Map and the Territory* : an Irishman's Diary

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An Irishman's Diary

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AN inhabitant of Bere Island off the west coast of Cork during the seismic years of the Celtic Tiger, Michel Houellebecq is well-known in Ireland. A substantial part of his novel *Atomised*, which won the prestigious Impac Dublin Literary Award in 2002, is based in Clifden, one of the most western points of the globe and the place where the main character Michel finally works out his theory for human cloning. The writer's fascination with the Emerald Isle was clear from a comment he made during a BBC interview in 2001: "Ireland is the only country where I cried, just seeing the landscape".

Houellebecq enthusiasts will be pleased that in spite of his fractious relationship with the French literary establishment, his latest novel, *The Map and the Territory*, was awarded the prestigious Prix Goncourt. When it comes to brewing up a media storm, there are few to compare with Houellebecq. His outrageous allegation about the failure of *Atomised* to win the Goncourt being due to his budget not being sufficiently large to bribe members of the jury, was met with a stony silence.

Atomised decried the negative impact the 1960s sexual revolution on the children of the baby boomers (a category Houellebecq falls into himself, having been committed as a young boy to the care of his paternal grandparents to allow his mother and father indulge their dream of sexual liberation), but it also described swingers' clubs and revealed a compulsion to indulge in rather tediously detailed sexual depictions.

The controversy surrounding the writer was heightened when his next novel *Platform* (2001) extolled the virtues of sex tourism and ended with a bomb attack by Islamic fundamentalists on a Western tourist resort in Thailand. In the lead-up to its publication, Houellebecq infuriated the Muslim community by stating that "Islam is the most stupid and murderous of all religions". Coming a few days before the 9/11 Twin Towers attacks, such a statement gave Houellebecq the aura of a seer or prophet, as well as that of a xenophobe.

One detects a softer, more reflective, less exasperating tone in *The Map and the Territory* which traces the life of the photographer/painter Jed Martin who, like so many of Houellebecq's creations, is a solitary, reflective

individual who seems unable to sustain any long-term human relationship. His fascination with photographing Michelin maps unexpectedly confers celebrity status on Jed. One of the few people to whom he feels close is none other than Houellebecq himself, who, in a technique that is a feature of certain postmodern authors, is a central character in the novel. Jed's father, on hearing that the writer might provide a preface for his son's latest collection, observes: "He's a good author, it seems to me. He's pleasant to read, and he has quite an accurate view of society".

In the main, such complimentary comments are rare, however. For example, when Jed visits Houellebecq in Ireland, he portrays him as a manic depressive, "a sick old turtle" whose personal hygiene leaves a lot to be desired. Suffering from eczema and athlete's foot, the famous author observes: "I'm rotting on the spot and no one gives a damn, no one can do anything to help me". Jed and Houellebecq exchange ideas about their art and one gets the impression that this is an excuse for the writer to develop some of his pet theories. Like how it is impossible to write a novel for the same reason that it's impossible to live: "due to accumulated inertia"; or how the theories of freedom, from Gide to Sartre, are mere "immoralisms thought up by irresponsible bachelors" – significantly he fails to come up with any worthwhile alternatives.

Death is a constant spectre in *The Map and the Territory* and Houellebecq admitted the calming influence this had on its composition: "You can't be a crazy rebel in the face of death, it's not a fitting attitude".

Jed's father goes to Switzerland for an assisted suicide on discovering that he has incurable cancer; Houellebecq is brutally murdered on his return to live in France; then there is Jed's own entry into old age and his coming to terms with living "in an ideologically strange period, where everyone in Western Europe seemed persuaded that capitalism was doomed", a subject on which Houellebecq has expounded on more than one occasion.

He has been described by the critic and translator Gavin Bowd as "the Karl Marx of the lonely", and readers will find a lot of self-referential and revealing material in Houellebecq's new novel, which is very different to anything he has done before. While he can repel and attract in equal measure, the awarding of the Prix Goncourt will ensure that "l'enfant terrible" of contemporary French fiction gets more serious academic attention than he has done to date. Also, it may assist Houellebecq to achieve the ambition articulated in an interview in the *Paris Review*: 'I want to be loved despite my faults'.

The Map and the Territory paperback edition is published by Vintage Books

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